

Sweaters

ICONS OF PEOPLE AND OF PLACE



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THE GUERNSEY

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Before we talk about the Aran, we need to first look at the Guernsey. A Guernsey is a knitted wool sweater from the British Channel Island of Guernsey. It was designed as durable clothing for the island's fishermen, to keep them warm and dry while working at sea.

As functional workwear, Guernseys are simple (aside from the occasional patterning at the shoulders), reversible with a raised, square neck, and with diamond-shaped gussets under the arm and splits along the hem for ease of movement. And although the working Guernsey is quite plain, it became popular to knit more decoratively patterned Guernseys for leisure wear as well.

Guernseys are made from worsted wool (tightly twisted and often five-ply) that is unscoured (meaning it retains its natural oils, or lanolin) and tightly knitted—all of which makes it hardy, thick, warm and wonderfully weather resistant. They were originally made of undyed wool, but when the Royal Navy adopted the Guernsey during the Napoleonic Wars, they were dyed navy blue, and that colour has remained popular ever since.

A FRIEND OF MINE TRAVELLED TO IRELAND a couple of years ago and returned sporting a cream-coloured wool sweater knitted from a stiff, thick yarn—an Aran sweater. He proceeded to wear it constantly, retiring it—temporarily, reluctantly—only for the summer months. I could hardly blame him; it's a gorgeous sweater.

At the time, I didn't know much about the Aran, nor about Canada's own local treasure: the Cowichan (or what are commonly referred to as "curling sweaters," due to their popularity within that "all-Canadian" sport). Knitting and other textiles are fascinating for the sheer variety of regional and cultural traditions of pattern and technique, each arising from local requirements, materials, fashion sense and history.

Some knitwear is born from local technique and pattern. Fair Isle sweaters feature rows and rows of patterned colour, made using the multiple-colour knitting technique developed on the island. Estonia produced the full-garment patterning of the Kihnu troi sweater, and from Norway comes the "lice" pattern of single dashes (the "luse" of the lusekofte sweater), and the famous eight-leaf rose, or selburose, which adorns nearly everything Nordic.

Other knitwear is distinctive for the type of wool used—such as the deliriously soft Alpaca wool from the Andes, or the thick, dense wool of the British Isles. Some knitwear is functional and utilitarian, some decorative and fashionable. And some, like the Aran, can be both.

TIP

BUY LOCAL ||| As local, traditional styles and patterns become popular with tourists and consumers, they tend to be appropriated and reproduced by less-scrupulous fashion designers and larger companies, who are often able to produce (and sell) their products more cheaply. They also benefit from the dedication and skill of local knitters, who have been passing down traditional knowledge for generations. When buying a Guernsey, Aran, Cowichan, lopapeysa or any other traditional knitwear, do the locals (and yourself) a favour, and try to buy straight from the source. Seek out a local knitting guild or knitting association, or a locally approved manufacturer carrying an authenticity trademark.

THE GREAT ARAN MYTH

A number of myths regarding the Aran persist, thanks to amateur historian and textile enthusiast Heinz Edgar Kiewe, who made all sorts of romantic (but erroneous) conjectures regarding the Aran in his 1967 book *The Sacred History of Knitting*. One of these is that stitching patterns were kept unique to each family so that fishermen could be easily identified if they were to drown at sea. It's more likely, however, that the diversity and intricacy of Aran patterns are simply a result of the creativity and experimentation of Aran knitters.



THE GANSEY AND THE ARAN



The Channel Islands became a major source of knitwear for the British textile trade in the 1600s, and remained so for centuries. Not surprisingly, the Guernsey sweater (or jumper, to the English) spread throughout the British Isles, taking on local flavours along the way—as well as the name “gansey.” Local knitters added their own embellishments, with intricate knitting patterns becoming distinct to different regions, communities and even families. The result is a multitude of wool gansey varieties across the UK and Ireland.

Perhaps the most elaborate of these—and arguably the most well known—is the Aran, developed in the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. The Aran comprises a myriad of stitching patterns, each linked to a different clan—cables and plaits, honeycombs and diamond lattices abound, along with other stitching patterns like the blackberry, moss, trellis, basket, “tree of life,” zig zag and ladder. The Aran is anything but plain.

Like the Guernsey (and the proliferation of related ganseys), the Aran is tough fishing workwear. It is thick and warm, reversible, and likewise made from unscoured wool, the natural lanolin making the Aran water resistant. The wool is also traditionally left undyed, giving the Aran its natural cream colour.



THE LOPAPEYSA



The Icelandic lopapeysa may not be an ancient tradition, but it certainly is iconic. The sweater was born from a period of renewed interest in Icelandic textiles during the 1950s, as Icelanders sought to revitalize traditional handicrafts in response to modern industrial clothing production. Soon everyone was not just sporting a lopapeysa, but learning how to knit themselves—the craft remains immensely popular in Iceland.

In terms of pattern, the lopapeysa actually borrows more from Greenlandic and Nordic knitting than Icelandic traditions, with its distinctive yoke design—a wide, patterned band around the neck, stretching from shoulder to shoulder. But central to the sweater is the unspun Icelandic wool known as “lopi” (“lopapeysa” literally means a peysa, or sweater, made from lopi).

Lopi contains both an outer wool fibre (the *log*, or the longer, coarse, water-repellent hairs) and an inner fibre (the *þel*, or the softer, insulating inner hair). This combination makes Icelandic wool unique—durable, but also lightweight, and excellent at insulating. Icelandic wool also comes in a variety of natural colours: white, black, grey and brown.



THE COWICHAN



The Cowichan is a sweater made by the Cowichan peoples of southeastern Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada. Cowichan sweaters are knit from thick, hand-spun, one-ply and undyed yarn, making use of just two or three natural colours. They are heavy and bulky, designed for warmth.

The Cowichan is known for its thick yarn, shawl collar and geometric patterns and animal motifs, but it is also unique for its combination of traditional Indigenous and European textile techniques. The Coast Salish peoples of the Pacific Northwest—including the Cowichan—developed their own spinning and weaving methods long before colonialism, weaving much-revered blankets and other textiles using a combination of mountain goat wool, goose down, cedar bark fibres and the hair from the now-extinct Salish Wool Dog. The yarn was spun on a spindle and whorl, and then woven on a two-bar loom.

European settlers began arriving in the 1850s, bringing sheep along with them. The Cowichan picked up the new source of wool, as well as European (chiefly British and Scottish) knitting techniques, adapting them to their own textile traditions. The Cowichan sweater was born, and soon became embellished with the same bold geometric patterns and motifs—whales, eagles and deer—used in traditional textile and basket weaving. 



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