



A CREATIVE GUIDE TO

**KNITTED
LACE**

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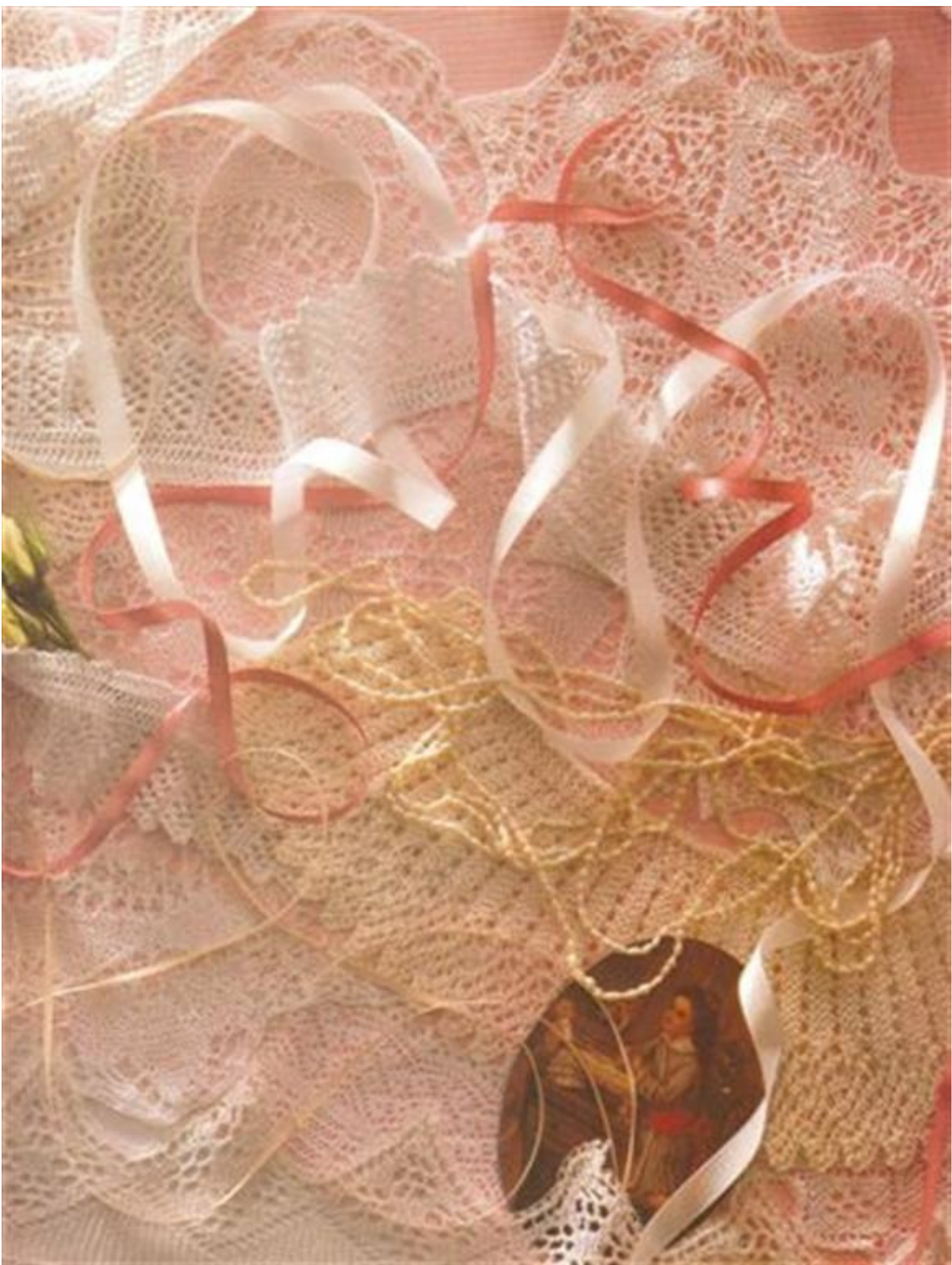
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The craft of knitting

Knitting dates back to the seventh century and has a long and distinguished history. From the patterned table carpets of the European knitting guilds to fine Elizabethan stockings and the wonderfully intricate shawls still made in the Shetland Isles, knitting skills have spread throughout much of the world. In recent times, knitting has been one of the most popular pastimes for both women and men, with a wealth of yarns and patterns available to whet even the most jaded appetite.

Many people knit sweaters, scarves and baby clothes, but few modern knitters are familiar with the beauty of lace made in this way. Whether worked in rows or rounds, a piece of knitted lace can be as fine, light and delicate as a cobweb or thick and soft with an interesting texture. The difference depends not only on the stitch pattern being used, but also on your choice of yarn and needles.





A LOOK BACK IN TIME

Knitting is the craft of making a looped fabric from a continuous length of yarn using two or more eyeless needles. The fabric can be flat or tubular. The craft has a long history with the earliest known pieces – discovered in parts of the Middle East – dating back to the seventh century. Textile fragments excavated from earlier cultures, Peruvian (900 BC to AD 600) and Coptic (4th century AD), were thought to show examples of knitting, but extensive studies of the fabrics have shown that the fragments were not constructed from one continuous piece of yarn. Instead, separate lengths were used, looped together using a needle with an eye.

The fragments of knitting which date from the seventh century show evidence of great skill and technical proficiency on the part of the workers – the pieces are knitted with coloured yarn in sophisticated geometric patterns which reflect contemporary tile and carpet designs. Although there is no hard evidence to allow us to trace the spread of knitting accurately from these early beginnings, it is safe to assume that knitting was brought by traders, sailors and soldiers from the Middle East to Europe.

The earliest reference to knitting in Europe is in a fourteenth century painting by Master Bertram. The painting, called 'The Visit of Angels', is part of the Buxtehude altarpiece and shows the Virgin Mary picking up stitches on a knitted shirt using four double-pointed needles. The name 'knitting' is taken from the Anglo-Saxon word *cnittan*, meaning threads woven by hand.

By the mid sixteenth century, the craft of knitting had spread widely throughout Europe and the first knitting guild was formed in Paris in 1527. Guilds were almost exclusively a male preserve – women had the tedious task of spinning the yarn,

then it was knitted up by men, a much more skilled and therefore prestigious occupation. Widows were the only women allowed to enter guild membership, providing their husband had been a guild member and they could cope with their dead husband's entire workload themselves. Guilds promoted a very high standard of craftsmanship with apprentices having to work and study for six years before knitting and preparing a shirt, a pair of socks, a felted cap and a colourwork carpet for their final examination.

As knitting guilds spread through Europe, different countries became renowned for making particular types of garments. France, Spain and Italy produced delicate, lacy silk gloves, stockings and jackets, while in southern Europe most knitting was worked into church vestments and ornaments. By contrast, in Germany and Austria, the majority of knitting was worked in wool yarn and the knitted fabric was usually heavily embroidered. This region became famous for making large knitted table carpets which were also used as luxurious wall hangings. The carpets were worked on a knitting frame instead of needles. The frames were set with pegs round which various colours of yarn were wound to make loops. The loops were then slipped off the pegs to create a knitted fabric. Although this technique had virtually died out by the mid nineteenth century, it still survives today in the form of the colourful tubes of bobbin or 'French' knitting made by children.

In England, knitted stockings became fashionable after Queen Elizabeth I accepted a pair of knitted silk stockings as a New Year's gift in 1560. This period heralded the beginning of knitting as both a flourishing domestic handicraft and a cottage industry, particularly as wool production was an important part of the country's economy.



EARLY KNITTING NEEDLES

The earliest knitting needles were made from a variety of materials including wood, copper, bone, metal wire, ivory and tortoiseshell and they became prized possessions. Needles were referred to by various terms during the sixteenth century, frequently they were called 'wires' or 'pins', particularly in Essex. The inventory of a Durham mercer, John Farbeck, dated 20 November 1597 refers to them as 'knitting pricks'; while an Italian dictionary compiled and published by John Florio in 1598 gives the first recorded mention of 'knitting needles'.

Needles were often made by the knitters themselves. The points were kept sharp by regularly regrinding and they were carefully protected with wooden or cork stoppers. When not in use, knitting needles were wrapped in leather folders or stored in cases or carved wood or ivory.

Knitting sheaths or sticks were used to speed up the work – essential for those knitting for a living. The sheaths, often beautifully carved and decorated, were tucked into the knitter's belt or apron strings on the right hip. The sheath held the end of the right-hand needle firmly, leaving the right hand free to knit, moving

the stitches rapidly from needle to needle. As many as 200 stitches a minute could be knitted in this way by a skilled worker. Knitting sheaths were often made by young men for their sweethearts, carved with intertwined initials, hearts, flowers and even mottoes.

By the mid sixteenth century, knitting had become accepted as an important method of making fabric. A law of 1565 ruled that every person older than seven years had to wear, on pain of a fine, 'upon the Sabbath or holyday upon their head a cap of wool knitted, thickened and dressed in England'. Many of these knitted and felted woollen caps still exist in museums throughout the country. The caps were knitted, then the fabric was thickened by immersion in water for several days so the wool fibres felted together to make a solid mat. The cap was shaped and dried on a wooden block, then the surface was brushed into a pile with a teasel brush. This process resulted in a thick, warm fabric which could even be cut without the yarn unravelling. Today, the traditional French beret and Turkish fez are still made in the same way.

Towards the close of the sixteenth century, demand for knitted garments,

particularly stockings for both men and women, began to outstrip production. William Lee, a graduate from Cambridge University, invented a rudimentary knitting machine between 1589 and 1600. Lee was unsuccessful in promoting his machine, which made stockings on a frame, mainly because its use was seen as a potential threat to the livelihood of handknitters. Gradually, however, the use of frames was developed. Although the Framework Knitters' Guild was granted a charter of incorporation as early as July 1657 and the days of commercial knitting by hand were in reality numbered, the development of mechanised knitting was very slow and hand-knitting continued to flourish as a cottage industry for another 200 years.

Many knitted pieces survive from the seventeenth century, usually in the form of ecclesiastical vestments or ornate garments made for court wear for the aristocracy, and these include beautifully patterned altar gloves knitted in red silks and gold threads and the Italian silk undershirt worn by King Charles I at his execution in 1649.

KNITTING FOR LEISURE

As hand-knitting gradually declined commercially, so the craft went through a revival as a purely domestic occupation. By the nineteenth century, the growth of a leisured class of women meant that much more time could be spent on working fine needlecrafts, particularly knitting, crochet and embroidery.

Intricate lace knitting worked in fine yarn on very fine needles became popular and many new lace stitches and patterns were invented during this period and used to make mittens, bonnets, shawls, tablecloths and layettes. Tiny glass and cut steel beads were threaded on to fine cotton or linen yarn and worked into intricately

patterned purses and pincushions. Ladies' journals and magazines published knitting stitches and patterns regularly, but in the more remote communities it was still the tradition to pass on patterns by word of mouth from generation to generation.

The traditional colourwork patterns worked by knitters from the Fair Isles, for example, are reputed to have originated from Spanish sailors swept ashore after the ill-fated expedition of the Spanish Armada in 1588 when many of the defeated ships were wrecked by storms. The majority of Fair Isle patterns have survived unchanged throughout the centuries and are still worked from memory rather than from written instructions. Patterns for Shetland shawls, beautiful lacy creations so fine that some can be passed through a wedding ring without harm, are handed down in the same way.

Knitting has remained one of the most popular pastimes during this century, probably reaching a peak in the 1930s and 1940s when the hand-knitted 'woollie' was in fashion.

Machine-made steel, and later aluminium and plastic, needles were inexpensive and readily available together with machine-spun and chemically dyed yarns. Magazines continued to publish a wide range of stitches and patterns, and there have been many excellent books published on the subject including Mary Thomas's books on stitches (*Book of Knitting Patterns*, 1943) and techniques (*Knitting Book*, 1938) and, more recently, Montse Stanley's *Handknitters' Handbook* (1986).

The more elaborate knitted lace pieces in this book, including the raised leaf Victorian bedspread (page 136) and the circular tablecloth (page 125), are from my collection of antique linen dating from the 1880s to the 1920s. My maternal grandmother, an expert knitter, used a raised leaf design similar to the bedspread motif