

## *Knot only about knitting*

*Dedicated to Keiry Belton*

When reading the *OIE In-house Times* you may have noticed the announcement to the weekly Wednesday lunch knitting club. Many people have stuffy and antiquated notions about who knits and what their knitting products look like. Think again, knitting has always brought people together, been at the forefront of fashion and can also have a creative [political/environmental/social](#) activist edge (check out the links, very cool stuff). A short overview on the use of animal fibres in textiles and the history of knitting is provided at the bottom of this article to interweave the connections between this amazing and useful artform and the OIE's mandate.

But you may ask yourself, 'How do people get into knitting?' A well-known knitting activist Betsy Greer reckons that most people who knit have a realisation that leads them to it - a kind of creative 'Aha!' moment. For others, it's linked to family and tradition, having learnt from their grandmother, mother, aunt or sister, or grandfather, father, uncle or brother. Nowadays, and this is particularly the case in the OIE knitting club, it is an amazing experience when someone teaches you how to wield a pair of needles and you suddenly realise, 'Hey, this is quite easy! And relaxing... And I get a scarf out of it!'

My experience with knitting was a combination of the three: I had learnt from my mother and knitted a scarf when I was 10 but gave it up quickly preferring to listen and dance to post-punk and new-wave music. However, many years later in the wake of my father's passing in August 2015, I felt the need for a creative outlet which would allow me to develop, implement and finish a project. I explored multiple options. First, I toyed with the idea of pottery, but quickly realised that my flat was way too small to fill with amateur-looking ceramic pots. What about theatre? Difficult in French, and I'm not so much a public speaking fan. I looked to husband who was happy to give me violoncello lessons, but I lacked discipline and figured that our neighbours may have enough with one noise-making musician in the family.

But then my husband suggested knitting, and I thought, 'Why not?' but I need to relearn. I did a quick online search for English-speaking knitting classes and stumbled across the blog of a New Zealander who had moved to Paris to accompany her husband who had accepted a position at the World Organisation for Animal Health - yep the OIE! I saw this as a sign! I wrote to Keiry Belton - Derek Belton's wife (previous Head of the then Trade Department) and asked if she could teach me during lunch at the OIE, she immediately accepted. I spoke to a few other OIE colleagues (Julie Macé, Sophie Riviere, Ingrid Contreras-Arias) and they were also interested. On Friday, 6 November 2015, the OIE knitting club was born.

This group - which has grown and shrunk and changed in composition since its establishment - continued to meet during the lockdown period. It is currently exclusively composed of women, although men are of course welcome, during our weekly Wednesday lunch, we discuss life, politics, work, the future and endless other topics. For me, it is one of my favourite moments of the week, where I can exchange and laugh with a group of very talented people.

Throughout the years, we have taught numerous staff and interns how to knit; but the knitting club is not exclusive to knitters. Former colleague Christine Uhlenhaut used to dabble in crochet and some other incredibly involved French lace work, Christine Leon Rolez made a felt Advent calendar, Maroussia Clavel simply drinks coffee, and Sonia Fèvre mends socks and trousers.

For me, knitting makes me feel happy, calm and productive; this is particularly amplified when knitting in a group.

As with most things, when done as part of a group, knitting is therapeutic and has strong psychological and social benefits - increased perceived happiness, improved social contact and communication with others - which ultimately contribute to increased well-being and quality of life.

But rather than continuing to ramble on, I thought that the best way to answer this question was to invite the OIE knitting club to share their thoughts and a glimpse of what they produced during lockdown. Here are my contributions.

We are still knitting every week and would be happy to welcome other colleagues, including from the regions. While teleworking is still in place, you are invited to join us on Wednesday at 12h30-13h30 (CET), ZOOM link: <https://oie.zoom.us/j/91543401282>.



### Tianna Brand

*'My aunt is the knitting, sewing, weaving, gardening, baking and canning guru in our family. Growing up I was always at her house and there was never an idle or uncreative moment. With her and through knitting I learned patience, directed attention, reflection and to never try to cover up a mistake! It will throw off the outcome, you will see it every time even when others do not. That being said, I am far from being a perfectionist, and sometimes I finish projects months (or years) later.'*



### Heidi Congdon

*'Making simple tangible things with my hands has been a great antidote to the virtual world of confinement. The knitting group has been a lovely way to get to know the people of the OIE at the same time. I blame the great conversation for how wobbly my pompom turned out!'*



### Ingrid Contreras Arias

*'Knitting is also a family heritage for me. It was one of my aunts who taught me. She had beautiful hands which made a sound when moving fast against the needles. I must say that I am not the most productive knitter, but the fun conversations we have during our knitting meetups is as soothing and comforting as that sound my aunt used to make. On top of everything, I get inspired by all the crafty work of my fellow knitters.'*



### Taylor Gabourie

*'Knitting for me was an activity handed down to me from my Mom, and to her from my Great Grandma, and I continue to use their needles. It's multidimensional connections between family, friends and colleagues, but you pick up the needles for yourself.'*



### Lydia Greve

*'Not only a good way to get tips on creative crafts, it is also a pleasure to get to know other colleagues and exchange on interesting topics. It has been fun to have this connection (even virtually during confinement) and hope that others feel welcome to join in if interested!'*



### Rebecca Hibbard

*'I learned knitting as a child from my Mum and Grandma, but only recently started knitting again about two years ago, which was perfect timing to join the OIE knitting group. Because I am a perfectionist, I usually spend as much (or more) time unknitting as I do knitting, so I appreciate having the excellent conversation and company of our group to keep me company during this process!'*



### Jenny Hutchison

*'So, how to explain that during confinement, for the first time in 30 years, I've picked up a crochet hook? Dare I confess that I'm using 100% acrylic yarn?? I don't actually like the feel of it, but have committed to finishing rather than unravelling this particular project.  
Signed, Serial Unraveller.'*



## Lucy Hogan

*'To come clean, I'm about as regular as a blue moon at the knitting group so am somewhat of an interloper on these pages. However, here's my six pence worth. Knitting, for me, has always been about community. Learning it at home and at school and now at work... And it allows us a much-needed creative outlet, even if my creation is something that looks thus far like the pelt of Big Bird.'*



## Christine Leon Rolez

*'My grandmother was a masterful knitter. She used this skill to bribe boarder officials in wartime Germany with warm winter gloves to ensure her safe passage. I have inherited her book of knitting swatches and one day wish to honour her memory by taking up the hobby in full honesty. But for now, I enjoy dabbling in felt art. And while I occasionally use the meetup to advance my projects, I mainly attend to catch up on OIE gossip and to have a good laugh. A great stress-reliever for the middle of the work week.'*



## Madison Wimmers

*'Knitting has been such a fun skill to learn over the past couple of years. There is something incredibly rewarding about being able to craft something from nothing, and have it (usually, sometimes, but not always!) turn out. Our little knitting and crafting community at the OIE makes it all the more fun!'*



## On the importance of animal fibres

At the World Organisation for Animal Health, we understand the value of and advocate for an increased appreciation of animals and their role in society. This is inherent in our mandate and missions and is clearly captured in our slogan: *protecting animals, preserving our future*. As professionals and individuals, we are aware that the role of animals in society continues to evolve in par with societal transformations and events.

The OIE's [Global Animal Welfare Strategy](#) launched in May 2017 reports that 'animals may be kept as working animals, companion animals, for production of food, **fibre** and other animal products, for scientific and educational purposes and are transported and traded internationally'. From an institutional perspective, the OIE recognises that all these purposes as legitimate, while carrying an associated ethical responsibility to ensure any such use is humane, as defined through the OIE's international standards for animal welfare, in recognition of the sentience of animals.

Animal fibres are natural fibres obtained from animals and convertible into non-woven elements (e.g. musical instruments) or, after spinning into yarns, into woven cloth. Animal fibres are basically hair or fur or skin or

secretions of animals, with the most common examples being silk, hair, fur, wool but also feathers. A natural fibre is defined as an agglomeration of protein cells in which the diameter is negligible in comparison with the length. Beyond economic considerations, the usefulness of a fibre is determined by properties such as length, strength, pliability, elasticity, abrasion, resistance, absorbency and various surface properties.

The use of animal fibres for textile materials predates recorded history. Gleba, in her article [Sheep to textiles: approaches to investigating ancient wool trade](#), notes that although sheep domestication process commenced in the Fertile Crescent (circa. 10,5000), the direct use of wool fibre in textile production can be traced dated no earlier than the 4th millennium BCE. Wool textile artefacts discovered in Iran have been dated back to circa 3100-1800 BCE, with sampling demonstrating that eight different types of fleece could be separated from these found treasures. Numerous artefacts from the area of textile production as well as finished products, fabrics and netting, have survived in the archaeological layers of late Neolithic and Bronze Age wetland settlements in eastern Switzerland. Reports of the spinning of cotton in India date back to 3000 BCE, while the International Sericulture Commission considers that the manufacture of silk and silk products originated in the highly developed Chinese culture, with the invention and development of sericulture (cultivation of silkworms for raw-silk production) and of methods to spin silk dating back from 2640 BCE.

With improved transportation and communication, development of highly localised skills and arts connected with textile manufacture, animal fibre practices spread to other countries and were adapted to local needs and capabilities.

During medieval times and as trade connections expanded, throughout the 13-15th centuries, wool emerged as an important trading commodity and a significant source of revenue for many countries; a key example in the European context is the Medici family which built their wealth and banking system on their textile industry essentially composed of wool. The main source of woollen textile value is the transformation process linked to the dyeing and finishing of the woven product. Systems of trades were created to subdivide and specialise the manufacturing process, commencing from the provision of the raw materials and concluded by the delivery of the manufactured product in accordance with the rules and provisions overseen by guilds.

The Industrial Revolution heightened use and manufacture further to the invention of machines capable of processing various animal fibres and resulting in a tremendous upsurge in animal fibre, particularly wool, production. This was eventually challenged by the introduction of regenerated cellulosic fibres and completely synthetic fibres. Recognition of the competitive threat from synthetic fibres resulted in intensive research directed toward the breeding of new and better strains of animal fibre sources with higher yields, improved production and processing methods, and modification of fibre yarn or fabric properties. These considerable improvements achieved have permitted increased total production, although natural fibres' actual share of the market has decreased with the influx of the cheaper, synthetic fibres requiring fewer person-hours for production. Australia's colonial economy was based on sheep raising, and the Australian wool trade remains an important contributor of the national economy: the [2018-19 financial year was about AUS\\$ 4.4 billion](#) (US\$ 4,389,573,578) signifying that gross value of wool production was less than 10% of gross value of agricultural production.

### **Animal fibres and knitting**

With animal fibre playing such a prominent role in history across all continents, specific techniques were developed and perfected for its use. A key technique for the manipulation of animal fibre is knitting.



Knitting is said to have originated in the Middle East in the 5th century and brought to Europe thanks to trade shortly after. Early knitted artefacts from Egypt are made from cotton fibres rather than wool and contain Arabic blessings or symbols to ward off bad luck.

Photo courtesy of:

<https://julzcrafts.com/tag/ancient-egyptian-knitting/>

In the 14th century, the knitted textile form was used by fisherman to make warm, woollen, weatherproof jumpers for trips to sea. By the 16th century, knitting machines were used to knit hosiery for elite classes. Knitting was transformed into a local industry in many parts of the Scottish Highlands, employing men in factories to knit stockings that were exported to the rest of Europe. Soon, hats, shawls, bags, clothing and other forms of knitwear were available on the market.



Photo courtesy of:

<https://www.the-sustainable-fashion-collective.com/2017/05/04/knitting-brief-history-knitting-uses>



The first knitting loom was built in 1816, whereas Eugene Rodier set up the first woollen textile factory in 1853, adapting and editing motifs from French Indo-China (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) and from French Equatorial Africa (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco) into their knitted pieces. By the 20th century, knitwear was, as it remains, a mainstream fashion item with all affordable knitwear on the market made industrially.

*Coco Chanel sporting a chic knitted jersey (c. 1920)*

Photo courtesy of:

<https://www.legacy.com/news/culture-and-history/coco-chanel-a-certain-style/>

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