



by Lee Ann Dalton

We knitters have always had a love affair with the rich and varied history of our craft. We “ooh” and “ahh” when we see vintage patterns, we trade knitwear sightings in books and films, and we applaud those of us brave enough to take on the world of archaic and/or culturally different terms to make patterns of the past readable for today’s knitter. Designers and teachers have brought the knitting delights of centuries past to the forefront of modern knitting (who doesn’t want a pair of all-wool swim trunks?) and if you’ve got a pattern that’s been lurking in a hope chest in Great Aunt Esther’s attic, you now have more than half a chance of being able to knit that garment, thanks to the more intrepid translators among us.

It’s to these folks that I turned when I first started to teach fiber arts as a historical reenactor of sorts, and needed knitwear, not only for myself, but for my husband and daughter. The journey has been epic, messy, involved a lot of false turns and language I am not allowed to use when I teach, and continues to stretch my skills in ways I never dreamed possible.



*The author in costume.*

Technically, I'm not required to wear a costume while I teach at Strawberry Banke, a 10-acre outdoor history museum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and when I've taught kids in schools about how wool has gone from sheep to garment over the centuries, I actually avoid wearing a costume. Nothing says "weirdo" to a teenager like a woman trouncing through a parking lot with her ruffled cap on her head, her knitted gauntlets up to her elbows, her petticoats dragging through the dirt, and her spinning wheel precariously balanced on her shoulder. I save those performances

for the Banke, preferring to transmit the delights of historical fiber arts geekery to school-aged kids through comparisons to their actual lives and garments they wear today, instead of freaking them out with how far up my chest has been pushed by my corset.

It is, however, impossible not to develop an inferiority complex when you go to the Banke dressed simply as yourself. Stunning outfits from a range of centuries abound, from indentured servant to captain's wife, and they're all handmade, many of them sewn by hand (yes, by hand). The knitwear, as well, is created by real people, not machines, and it's all historically accurate. I and my "out in public, marginally better than jeans and muck boots" fancy-dancy outfit would have been just fine, except that I'm a knitter. Knitters see a bar raised, and they go for it. So, like the brave knitter that I am when I'm not thinking too clearly, I took one look at the ruffles and curves, the long knitted gloves and the fichus, and said heck, I can put together garments, right? How hard can it be?

Oh, honey. "How hard can it be" turns out to begin weeks—nay, months—before one can even put needles to yarn, or thread to fabric. In the world of historical reenactment, even if you're not playing a particular character but simply using your costume as a talking point for teaching, there are RULES. Rule Number One is to make it, whatever "it" is, with a historically accurate pattern whose origins can be documented. And so, the search began. I don't really want to talk about the drab, dreary corner into which my 1849 spinning wheel with the date painted right on it (damn those Norwegians and their fancy personalized painting techniques) has backed me dress-wise, but the knitwear from the 19th century rocks the house. *Godey's Lady's Book* makes up for its Don't-Freaking-Look-At-My-Rack dresses with some of the most beautiful and complex hats, stoles, gloves, and bags a knitter could ask for. (I have to admit, though, that I'm still searching for a day dress pattern that shows a little bit of skin. I'd settle for a clavicle, at this point.)

But I began my historical knitting odyssey with a hat for my husband, and it turns out, the knitwear iteration of Rule Number One for really early pieces is a doozy. I rapidly learned that I had to be very, very careful about choosing patterns. There are a few well-respected designers out there, like Mara Riley and Sally Pointer, who have done their homework and created patterns based on research and archeological evidence. But there are also a lot of, for example, "fisherman's caps" that didn't come into vogue until the end of the 19th century, and a lot of movie designs that looked great for Hollywood but were completely inaccurate for historical purposes. For my husband, who wanted a cap that would have been used by the average field worker or sailor from the 18th century, I needed just the right pattern. Mara Riley's Monmouth Cap was it: based on a 14th-century cap found at an archeological site, and noted throughout historical documents of the next several centuries as the cap to have if you were doing any kind of rough work at all, it was perfect for my needs. Also, it didn't look like a muppet. (Google "thrum cap." I dare you. I am SO NEVER making that hat for anyone, ever. I don't care how many sailors wore it.)

Rule Number Two is to always use materials and techniques that would have been used at the time the pattern was created. No synthetics allowed (this rule is followed right down to the thread), and if the sewing machine wasn't invented before your dress was designed, you sew it by hand.

This is hell for procrastinators, let me tell you. Last year I made two capes and two wool petticoats (skirts) in two days, hand-sewn. My family had to talk me down from the caffeine ledge in order for me to not twitch uncontrollably. It's a very good thing it was Halloween at the Banke, and I was only required to look authentically costumed and authentically dead. I did both, very well. Also, we will not discuss the fact that at least 50 percent of the women wearing corsets, myself included, have boned them with Home Depot plastic zip ties. Shhhhh...

For knitwear from the 18th century or earlier, Rule Number Two can be tough to follow unless you have a farmer's market or a wool-producing sheep farm nearby—especially if you need yarn, like, yesterday. (Have I mentioned this stuff isn't really good for procrastinators?). I didn't have time to spin the wool for the garment myself, so I had to get it from someone who did, in a color that was actually used back then, either created from a natural dye or a color that existed in real life on a sheepy butt. Because I missed the farmer's market the week I needed the yarn, I had a very entertaining hour searching for wool yarn at my local shop, Charlotte's Web. It had to be bulky yarn, which turned out to be not easy to find in 100-percent, naturally colored, handspun wool. Couldn't be tweed (I didn't want little bits coming off the hat). Couldn't be superwash (that doesn't felt). Couldn't contain mohair (goats of New England were milk-and-meat goats). Couldn't be ordered (I needed it yesterday). We settled on a handspun worsted weight wool in a beautiful, undyed brown, and I would just have to hold it double to get the correct gauge.

This is where the swearing came in handy. Holding yarn double, for me, was like asking for one of the strands of yarn to accidentally drop three or four rows down before I noticed it had done so. To make matters worse, the yarn that is so good for felting had somewhat felted itself in my sweaty hands (I was knitting really, really fast), so laddering down to pick up the dropped strand was a project in itself. It would actually have been easier to spin my own bulky yarn. I suffered for my art, though, and the beauty of knowing I was recreating a garment that was the It Hat of the 14th century and still looked fantastic today made up for all those dropped strands. The magic of turning the brim on that purl row and knitting it together to make a beautifully neat and tidy double brim still trips my trigger: Elizabeth Zimmerman's books have this technique everywhere, and it turns out she was following the masters of non-snagging knitwear from way back.

Putting myself in the place of the garment wearer is the coolest and most interesting part of knitting historical pieces. You have to think about the purpose the garment actually served. For example, the brim of the Monmouth cap can be wide, like a bucket hat, or tighter to the head (but not too tight, as you want to be able to wear it down or up). I chose the tighter version, because the wearer said, "Even field workers knew when they were looking dorky, dude," and the tighter version allows for a triple layer around the ears if you work things right. Being able to have a triple layer or pull the brim down on your neck is pretty necessary when you're out on rough seas.



*The Monmouth cap.*

The top of the hat can have a button created from a ring knitted around and tied on, or it can have a loop, and some Monmouth caps have the loop at the bottom of the brim. The garment wearer said, "Gotta have the loop for drying the hat," but I decided not to put it on the brim, because it would catch on collars and get snagged in ropes. The loop at the top was my choice for finishing, and the pattern said to crochet it, but I-cord holds up better when you're hanging it to dry or attaching it to the inside of your helmet. And I imagined that if you were a guy knitting your hat because you needed it that season, you would rather have used the tools you already had in your hands than go searching for your hook. I could be wrong. Perhaps the knitting equivalent of standing in front of the fridge asking where the hell the butter went to didn't happen back then at all. (Also, I couldn't find my crochet hooks, and I really like I-cord.)



*Tools of the trade.*

Then came the felting. Most knitwear for working people ended up being a bit felted anyway, because it was worn in conditions where it was both wet and agitated a fair bit. Felted knitwear is also pretty bombproof, weather-wise. But I couldn't felt it in the washing machine if I wanted to remain authentic in my pursuit of historical accurateness. Oh, no, my friends. I did the equivalent of making wine, only with knitwear and a bucket of hot water on the front porch. I foot-felted the hat. If my neighbors weren't talking to me before, well, they're certainly stepping to the other side of the street now...



*Foot felting.*



Once the hat was dry, it became not only an object of simple technical beauty and usefulness in extreme conditions, but it has already been used to teach a few budding medievalists and reenactors alike just how relevant knitwear from the past is to modern life. Would the hat do its hat job if I had made it using modern conveniences? Undoubtedly, yes, and I would perhaps not have deepened the angry-face brow lines I seem to be inheriting from my grandmother. But making a garment using exactly the materials and techniques our ancestors used begins to work a kind of magic on everyone who sees that garment, knowing just how much energy and care went into the process. It sounds silly, but this hat really is pure magic. I've never seen so many people not only light up hearing the story of such a basic knitted garment, but want one for their very own, made in exactly the same way. It may take a while, but I'll win my horrified neighbors over yet, and they may yet hear the echo of their own history calling to them. Until then, you know where you can find me: on the porch with my feet in a bucket and a spindle in my hands. The next historically accurate Monmouth cap is going to be mine, all mine.

*Lee Ann Dalton is a poet, fiber arts columnist, freelance writer, spinner, knitter, gardener, marathoner, late bloomer, and devotée of the serial comma. She lives in Exeter, New Hampshire, with her equally insomnia-driven husband, her Latin-obsessed daughter, and three cats, including the amazing one-eyed Shackleton. She blogs at [Knot Good](#).*