

by Sunday Holm

*Like so many other knitters, my knitting touchstone is Elizabeth Zimmermann. For the past 25 years, I have relied on her sensible advice, been entertained by her writing, and have been inspired by her to “knit on through all crises.”*

*Still, nothing in the world prepared me for these words spoken by a new customer at Stix-n-Stitches in Montclair, New Jersey:*

*“My godmother, Elizabeth Zimmermann, knit a sweater for me years ago that is really falling apart. Do you know anyone who could repair it?”*

The owner of the shop, Sheila Handelsman, and I were sitting at the table, having lunch. We both stopped chewing and froze.

I looked up at the speaker and said, “Your godmother was Elizabeth Zimmermann?”

The woman, Joan Smith, smiled sweetly, and explained. She had grown up next to the Zimmermann family in Gardnerville, New York. Elizabeth Zimmermann was her godmother and long ago knit for her a sweater that Joan had loved and worn, both of Joan's daughters had worn, and that was now in serious need of retirement. Search as she may, she had never found anything like it in Elizabeth's canon of published sweater patterns.

I was very curious, and of course, eager to see the sweater. I suggested that she bring it in so that we could see what we could do with it.



In a few days, Joan brought us the sweater. She visited my "Knit Your First Sweater" class and entertained us with hysterically funny stories of her childhood. Having been neighbors with the Zimmermann family, Joan regarded Elizabeth not as Knitting Royalty, but as her mother's friend. The Zimmermann kids were her childhood playmates.

For us, an undiscovered Elizabeth Zimmermann design was the Holy Grail of knitting. It was with respect and reverence that I inspected Joan's sweater. Someone suggested that we only touch it with white gloves, and they weren't kidding. But I felt that Elizabeth would not approve of sweater worship. It is an amazing sweater, but in pretty sad shape after being loved and worn for over fifty years. Someone had once tried to darn holes on the body with thread that has cut into the stitches, and there are places on the sleeves where the yarn has worn away.





After inspecting it I realized that while the holes might be darned, the sweater would never again be wearable. It would need to be duplicated. My first task was to find a suitable yarn. As threadbare as it is in places, the original yarn is still beautiful. It is a heathered green with flecks of blue and yellow, and feels like a Shetland. The gauge is five stitches to the inch, but knit very loosely. I poured over Jamieson, and Jamieson and Smith color cards. I swatched two strands of two different greens, it looked like a compromise. I considered Harrisville Shetland, but none of the colors came close. I looked at the colors of [Rangeley yarn](#) that Elizabeth's daughter, Meg Swansen, offers through Schoolhouse Press, convinced that it would be there. The gauge and spin was right, but the color was wrong.

I envisioned Elizabeth digging through her stash of yarn brought back from the UK, and realized that if I got stuck on the exact color, I would never get the sweater finished. I finally dug through my stash and found Berroco's Ultra Alpaca in a beautiful heathery green. Not the same shade, but beautiful in its own right, and the correct gauge.

When I took the sweater home, the first thing that I did was to lay it out flat and measure it in every aspect. I then counted stitches and rows and graphed it out. It may seem a simple matter to copy a sweater, but what was important to me was that this sweater be knit in exactly the way that Elizabeth would knit it; to recreate it in an authentic way.

The sweater itself does not look like anything in EZ's patterns, but is so... Elizabethan: simple, elegant, and very knitter-ly. The sweater is a cardigan, waist length, and extremely deep square-set armholes. The neckline is deep and square. The buttonholes are thread loops, attached later with a buttonhole stitch. I marveled at the Zimmermann touches: a mitered, knitted hem, sleeves knit in the round, phoney seams, mitered neckline hem and then surprise! Grosgrain ribbon is sewn not to the back of the button band, but tucked inside the button band. It suggests that it had been inserted to stabilize the front to prevent stretching, and if that is the reason, it is a perfect solution.



Knowing Elizabeth's aversion to knitting back and forth, I felt certain that the sweater had been knit in the round and steeked. But the mitered hem gave me pause. It would be interesting to try a steeked miter. I knitted a circular swatch with full fashioned decreases, then increases on either side of five stitches. When cut, the edges fell into a very tidy miter. In the end, however, I abandoned this technique as an affectation. In most traditional sweaters, the hem is knitted back and forth until the hem is completed, extra stitches are cast on for the steek, and then the sweater is joined to be completed in the round.

The oddest feature is that the sleeve decreases are on the top of the sleeve. They taper down to a very slim wrist, and then flare out suddenly to a gauntlet. The sleeve decreases really intrigued me. Never have I seen this done in a sweater, but it is a lovely design feature.





While swatching, and writing out a tentative pattern, the sleeves continued to haunt me. My first instinct was that they were an ethnic design element of some sort, but one that was not obvious. In her book, *Knitting Around*, Elizabeth writes of her time as a governess to a Finnish family, and of a Christmas in Sweden. Might she have been influenced by Swedish blouses? There is no definitive answer, but one has to assume that any knitter with a mind as facile as EZ's would surely have been influenced by the styles of the culture in which she lived.

I checked out *Swedish Sweaters* by Britt-Marie Christoffersson, and it contains a number of knitted blouses with this distinct armhole. *Poetry in Stitches*, by Solveig Hisdal also has a pattern for a short cardigan with deep armholes. But none of them had decreases on the top of the sleeve.



While the actual mechanics of how to knit the sleeve was not a problem for me, the actual understanding of the mystery of why she did knit the decreases at the top of the sleeve really began to get to me. There were evenings when I just held the original in my hands, thinking about it -- as if I was trying to channel Elizabeth Zimmermann herself.

It was during this time that I really learned something about myself. The issues that we have in our lives turn up in our craft. In recreating this sweater, I learned that I can get stuck on the minutia and lose sight of the final goal. Months went on and inertia set in. It took a call from Joan to get me going again. She wondered about the progress on the sweater, and I realized that the why of the sleeves didn't matter to Joan. She simply wanted a sweater. That freed me up to move on to the square neck opening -- also steeked and mitered, and the impish sleeves.

So, I counted the stitches, steeked the armholes, and knit the sleeves down to the wrist. I then increased at the underside of the sleeve, and maintained the decrease on the top of the sleeve. It flared out exactly like the original.





When it was finally finished, my feeling was that I had nailed it. It was the same in size and shape. So many of the techniques that I needed to knit the copy were techniques that I had learned from Elizabeth Zimmermann.

Joan loved the sweater. She seemed pleased with the recreation.

As Joan thanked me, I thanked her. What a wonderful gift she had given me: the opportunity to recreate a sweater from a knitting master. It reinforced all of the knitting techniques I had learned. It also fostered a desire to explore ethnic knitting from Scandinavia. I am still intrigued by the mystery of those sleeves.

A few days later, Joan returned to the store with another gift. It was the original sweater, wrapped in tissue. She told me that she really thought that I should have it, because she knew how much this project had meant to me.

I think that I will have the original put in a shadow box -- but only one that I can open. I don't think EZ would approve of any sweater hermetically sealed in a frame. Sweaters are meant to be worn and enjoyed. That is the best lesson that I learned from Elizabeth Zimmermann.



*Twist Collective wishes to thank Meg Swansen for her gracious participation in our bringing this sweater to public attention. Due to the positive public response to this article, Schoolhouse Press will be publishing the pattern later this fall. Get your name on their newsletter to receive the release announcement.*