by Lela Nargi

Susette Newberry is a historian who thinks like a knitter. Or is she a knitter who thinks like a historian? Whatever the answer to this chicken-and-egg-like conundrum, one thing's for sure. Newberry's craft-archivist proclivities have led her to a masterly opus: an alphabet, constructed entirely of knitting.

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Explains Newberry, “I’ve been interested in abecedaria — books that showcase designs for the letters of the alphabet — since college some twenty-five years ago” That was also when she picked up the knitting bug. “Rather than writing and illustrating an abecedarium, I decided to make my own version, grounding the project in my combined passions.”

Those passions have served her project remarkably well. Newberry’s letters, each of which riffs on a different typographic design, is a work of art in its own right. But just as compelling are the extensive background essays she compiles for them and posts on her popular blog. Did I mention? Newberry’s first and foremost occupation is librarian, at the fine arts library at Cornell University. Yes, this lady’s got access to books. Lots, and lots, and lots of books. And she certainly delights in using them.

The whole undertaking has proved enormous, and enormously time-consuming. At press time, Newberry had been knitting, researching, and writing for two years and had finally managed to complete the letter U (a testament to the tidiness of her mind: she’s been knitting them in order) — although she’s also at least plotted out V through Z.

Thus, in Newberry’s fantastic yarn/book world:

A is an Artichoke design inspired by William Morris motifs;
B is replete with Bohus Stickning patterning;

C is made from Cables;

D is made in the style of Danish Damask;
E is incorporated into what Newberry has dubbed her “Endless Fair Isle Sweater”’
F is fashioned from Fair Isle;
G is tucked into the stitches of a Gansey;
H, for History, is a loopy turquoise affair informed by Annemor Sundbø’s book *Invisible Threads in Knitting*
I, for Inspiration, is a long narrow swatch incorporating eyelet columns;
J is two interlocking Js in Centaur font and Italic Swash Caps;
K refers to William Morris’ Kelmscott Press marks;
L is fuzzy from Lopi;

M is made from the usually-electronic font known as Mantinia;
N, for Nantucket, harkens back to New England Needlework samplers;
O is for – what else? – Fair Isle's ubiquitous OXO pattern;
P, for Peru, is set in a stripey triangle that looks like the earflap of a ch'ullu;
Q is a colorful loop and curl of steely Quatrefoil, what Newberry terms the "architectural equivalent to a four-leaf clover";
R is a Red Letter;

S is for Suzani, and the Silk Road along which it originated;
T stands for Turkey (the country and its intricate knitting motifs, not the holiday bird);
U is for Union Pearl, the seventeenth-century group of italicized initial caps that Newberry's blog name riffs on;
V stands for Viking;
W will be dyed blue with Woad;
X, as in X-height, which in typography is, technically, the height of the letter x;
Y will appear on a sweater Yoke;
Z is for the ornamental penmanship font, Zaner; and, the pièce de résistance:
& will be represented by a black and white repeating-ampersand motif hat.

With so many fonts and typefaces and knitting traditions out there, how did Newberry ever manage to settle on a single theme for each letter? Somehow, that part of the equation came easy. Claims Newberry, "Most of my letters have chosen themselves, except 'Q,' which several readers of my blog suggested. And whenever possible, I've tried to combine themes." For example, K for Kelmscott combines elements of design with the history of typography, the history of the book, letterpress, textiles, and of course, Knitting. N for Nantucket is "probably the best example of combining," in Newberry's estimation. "Nantucket Quaker samplers were displays of literacy, but also exquisite excursions into letterforms in the form of hand-wrought textiles."

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After the choosing, of course, comes the research — hours and hours of research, which Newberry calls “fulfilling.” And then: the knitting. Hours and hours and days and weeks of knitting. Although, “Each letter has been a completely different time commitment. The first few were pretty easy to write about, didn’t involve a lot of research, and since I wasn’t knitting anything new, they took

about three or four hours. By the time I got to ‘F’ and started making videos and knitting enormous swatches at a tiny gauge, I was devoting more like thirty or forty hours to each one, not getting much sleep, but loving every moment. Since I work full time, I knit at night and on weekends, and until my fingers drop off during holidays.”

This is all much to the delight of Newberry’s devoted blog readers, who also anticipate the (hopefully not too) eventual outcome of all this alphabetically inspired knitting. What else could that be but… a book? When every letter’s been stitched up, Newberry plans to set it into a white knitted border, then bind all the “pages” together with a cover, spine, and endpapers. “It will be rather thick, of course,” she muses, “but a recognizable codex. Only soft. And wooly.”

You can follow the historical stitchery of Susette Newberry’s abededarium on Knitting Letters: A to Z.

This article has been adapted from an entry in Lela Nargi’s upcoming book for Voyageur Press, The Greatest Knitting of All Time*, Spring 2011. Visit her at* lelanargi.com