



# NORWEGIAN HANDKNITS

HEIRLOOM DESIGNS FROM VESTERHEIM MUSEUM

Sue Flanders and Janine Kosel

Foreword by Laurann Gilbertson, Textile Curator, Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum





*Cross-Country Ski Socks on loom, Vesterheim Museum.* PHOTOGRAPH BY SUE FLANDERS



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## About the Authors

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*This book is dedicated to our mothers,  
Rosemary Jane Malkovich Kosel and Margaret Viola Dye Klein*



*“We honor our mothers with all they have taught us.”*

ENID GRINDLAND



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*Vesterheim Museum, today.*

# Foreword

by Laurann Gilbertson, Textile Curator  
Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum

Museum collections are meant to be shared in formal exhibitions, studied through careful research, and preserved for future generations. Museum collections are also for inspiration. All museum curators hope our artifacts will inspire visitors to want to learn more about history, culture, art, craftsmanship, and technology—and about themselves. Vesterheim's collections inspired Sue Flanders and Janine Kosel to create the patterns that appear in this book. It has been my pleasure to watch as they discovered our textile treasures, knit reproductions, and created new interpretations.

The Norwegian word *flink* describes Sue and Janine very well. *Flink* is hard to express in a single English word. It means adroit, clever, creative, ingenious, skillful, resourceful, and gifted. Their joyful and artistic designs honor and celebrate history, tradition, and needleworkers.

I hope you will follow the thread set forth in this book. Be inspired, add some of yourself to your work, and do what you love.



*Woman's embroidered shirt,  
from East Telemark, Norway, eighteenth century.*  
LUTHER COLLEGE COLLECTION

## A Brief History of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum

The collection that would become Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum started in 1877 as a study aid for students at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, and now includes twenty-four thousand objects. The first gift to the museum was a collection of bird eggs and nests. In the early years, the collection included natural history (biology, geology) and cultural items, some of which had been collected by Lutheran missionaries serving around the globe.

By 1895, faculty and alumni at Luther College officially resolved that Norwegian immigrant materials should be a stated focus of the collection. The museum

became a pioneer in the preservation and promotion of America's cultural diversity. It was a natural repository for items that might otherwise have been thrown away.

The first historic building was added to the grounds in 1913, starting the Open Air Division. No other museum in the United States was collecting buildings, though this was already taking place in Scandinavia. Skansen, in Stockholm, Sweden, and Norsk Folkemuseum in Oslo, Norway, were the world's first open-air museums.

In 1925, in honor of one hundred years of emigration, Anders Sandvig, founder of Maihaugen Open Air Museum, Lillehammer, Norway, coordinated a gift of

artifacts from Norwegian museums to the collection at the Luther College Museum. “May these objects work,” wrote Sandvig, “so that the Norwegian-ness in you will not die too soon, and the connection with the homeland will because of this be stronger. Receive this gift as proof that we follow you all in our hearts, even though the big Atlantic parts us.”

The artifacts, which took two years to assemble and filled twenty-three crates, included roomfuls of carved and painted Norwegian furniture and household items like ale bowls, trunks, and cooking equipment. The gift also included many stunning textiles, like the embroidered shirt from Telemark that inspired the Foolish Virgins Pillow. The museum in Nordmøre, Norway, sent several clothing items, including two men’s shirts trimmed with fine whitework embroidery. Those who made the donation had no way of knowing that this gift meant the survival of several cultural treasures because their museum would be destroyed during World War II.

After the war, Inga Bredesen Norstog, curator of what was now called the Norwegian-American Historical Museum (still part of Luther College), submitted articles about the museum to newspapers and magazines around the country, which were published in the *New York Times*, *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, *Life*, *Woman’s Day*, *Antiques*, and some national Norwegian-language publications. Sometimes she would feature specific artifacts, which then made people think about

how special some of their family pieces were. Soon the museum was receiving visitors and artifact donations from all over the United States.

The museum became an independent institution in 1964 and adopted the name Vesterheim in honor of the term that immigrants used to describe America in letters home. America was their *vesterheim*, their “western home.”

In the 1960s, Director Marion Nelson added fine art to the museum’s collection statement, reflecting his belief that there is art in everyday objects. Today, we are “refining” the collection, looking to fill gaps to ensure that Vesterheim’s artifacts can tell more stories of immigrant experiences, of American experiences.

## Norwegian and Norwegian-American Knitting

Historically, knitting was a vital skill in Norway. Women used wool that they had processed, beginning with raising sheep, shearing them, carding the wool, and spinning it into yarn. Many Norwegian immigrants living in the American Midwest in the nineteenth century also raised sheep for their warm, soft, durable wool and for meat.

Although immigrant women could have purchased ready-knit items or yarn for knitting, they often processed their own wool for yarn. Immigrants believed that hand-spun wool yarn and hand-knit objects were better—warmer and more durable—than what they could buy in the store. If women had not brought spinning wheels with them, they could buy them here from talented carpenters or even from mail-order businesses, such as Alfred Andresen & Company of Minneapolis, Minnesota, who imported wheels from Norway.

Aside from warmth and durability, knitting was also valued for its beauty. Colorfully embroidered mittens and gloves were worn to church in Norway.



*Hillside scene, probably Hardanger, Norway, 1890s.*

SENATOR KNUTE NELSON COLLECTION, VESTERHEIM ARCHIVE



*Margit Kostveit carding (left), her son Halvor, and her sister spinning. Gardsjord, Rauland, Telemark, Norway, 1890s.*  
GAUSTA COLLECTION, VESTERHEIM ARCHIVE

In Selbu, near Trondheim, it was a tradition for the bride to give patterned mittens to all the members of her wedding party. Knitting was an expression of creativity and skill. Immigrants brought many of these skills, traditions, and textiles with them when they immigrated to the United States.

The design of embroidered church mittens and gloves varies by the Norwegian region in which they were made. The floral embroidery on mittens from Hallingdal, for example, is symmetrical and grows in layered petals from a tight bud. In contrast, the embroidery on gloves from Telemark is asymmetrical. Floral motifs are based on C- or S-shaped curves.

Two-color, stranded, or pattern-knit mittens and gloves have small patterns on the palm for durability and larger patterns on the backs of the hands. Eight-petal flowers, called *åttebladrosen*, are common motifs. They look to us like snowflakes or stars. Animals, initials, and other floral motifs appear on the backs, thumbs, and cuffs. The cuffs, by the way, might be ribbed if the intended wearer were male, or lacy if the intended wearer were female.

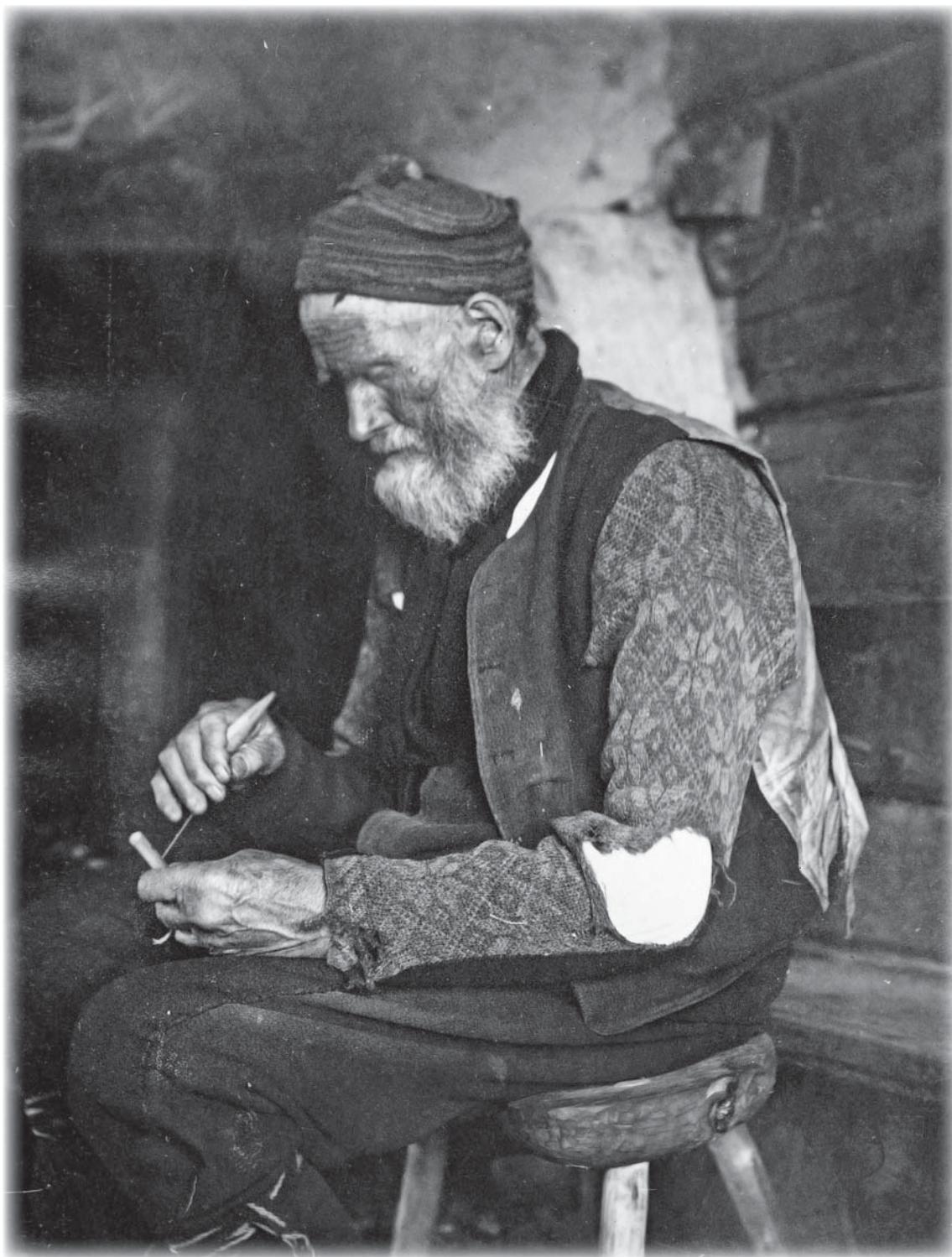
The Norwegian sweaters that we love so much (and need in cold climates) have very humble beginnings. Some of the earliest sweaters, worn by men, were considered underwear. The sweaters were worn over a shirt and tucked into trousers, with a vest and coat worn over the top. This is why you don't see sweaters often in old photographs unless, as in the photograph by Herbjørn Gausta of Gjermund Gaustad on page 10, one of the outer layers has been removed.

Many of these sweaters featured two-color designs because of the extra warmth the second yarn provided, but because the undershirt/sweaters were tucked into trousers, the sweaters featured only one color below the waist to save time and conserve yarn.

Luckily for us, Norwegian sweaters became outerwear for everyone, young and old. For some, sweaters like Sue and Janine's Voss Sweater have become a palette for creative expression, for others a source of pride in Norwegian heritage. You don't have to be Norwegian to love Norwegian knitting, though; you just have to appreciate beauty, warmth, and a little bit of history.



*Sheep shearing, Telemark, Norway, 1890s.*  
GAUSTA COLLECTION, VESTERHEIM ARCHIV



*Gjermund Gaustad mending nets in a well-worn sweater, Tinn, Telemark, Norway, 1890s.*

GAUSTA COLLECTION, VESTERHEIM ARCHIVE

# Introduction

Norwegian knitting usually conjures up visions of ski sweaters worn by the Scandinavian teams at the Winter Olympics. It was the beauty and relative simplicity of these sweaters that inspired us to learn more about Norwegian fiber traditions. We were first introduced to Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum through various fiber-related classes that they offered, including spinning, *nålbinding*, Setesdal embroidery, band weaving, bentwood box making, and felt making. Vesterheim is the oldest and most comprehensive museum in the United States dedicated to a single immigrant group, Norwegian Americans.

On a trip to the museum over Halloween weekend in 2004 for the band-weaving class, we were invited for a behind-the-scenes peek at the textile collection. The sheer magnitude of the collection was very impressive. We marveled at drawers filled with colorful mittens and gloves, racks loaded with incredible embroidered *bunads*, and rolls of exquisite tapestries. After picking our chins up off the floor, we turned to one another and announced together, “We need to create a book!”

We journeyed again to Vesterheim on Thanksgiving weekend and between squeals of childlike delight, we began the process of putting ideas to paper and needles; *Norwegian Handknits* was conceived.

Over the next few years, we took many trips to Vesterheim. During our drive to Decorah, we were



*A view of Seed Savers.*

always impressed by a sign for Seed Savers, an heirloom seed farm. This farm strives to ensure the preservation of old seeds by growing ancient plant varieties and selling the seeds to gardeners who in turn propagate them. If a seed is not planted in a few years, it will dry out and fail to germinate a new crop.

We immediately drew a parallel to our work designing new patterns from the textiles housed in the collection at Vesterheim. As knitters, we are the farmers, and the designs in this book are the seeds. We want to nurture these old fiber traditions to ensure they are not forgotten. With this book, we hope to help preserve the heritage of the Norwegian

people who immigrated to their “western home.”

As we studied the artifacts and reviewed old photos, we felt a connection to the knitter, weaver, painter, needleworker, or artist who made the piece. We imagined what it would have been like to live in the mountains of Norway or do the daily chores on a farm in a new land. The inspiration for some of the patterns came very naturally by just modifying the old design. Other patterns, such as the Voss Family Sweaters, took extensive study of the artifact and days of graphing various pattern possibilities. The end result is a collection of patterns steeped in Norwegian history that we hope you will enjoy knitting for family and friends.

## CHAPTER

# 1

## Using Basic Knitting Techniques



*Margit Gardsjord Kostveit and her daughter, Telemark, Norway, 1890s.*

GAUSTA COLLECTION, VESTERHEIM ARCHIVE

The textiles at Vesterheim are examples of exceptional work stitched with loving hands. Many of the items were made for special occasions, such as weddings or holiday celebrations. There are very few daily-wear items found in the museum collection. It is believed that either not many daily-wear items survived, or the benefactors felt that the items were not worthy of donation. That said, we did discover a few basic utilitarian garments for everyday use; these garments, though simple, still demonstrated the skill and creativity of the creator. We chose to include a few of these easy-to-knit, yet elegant garments in this chapter. The need for warm, functional knitting was key to remaining comfortable while moving around the farm doing chores. Since homes relied on wood fireplaces to keep warm, a cozy garment or accessory was always welcome. In Ruth's collection, the basic knit and purl stitch are used to create a thicker fabric, which provided better insulation.

# Ruth's Cap



When we saw the original cap at the museum, we could almost picture the baby who wore it—full, red cheeks, a sweet temperament—this child was definitely the apple of his or her daddy's eye. We love the simplicity and beauty of this pattern—garter stitch columns paired with stockinette rows that are dotted with a garter ridge. The stitch pattern used in the cap lends itself to many items, so we've created Ruth's Collection.

We made a few changes when we knitted Ruth's Cap. The original was knit in rayon, but we used machine-washable wool produced just for a baby. We also added a firmer-fitting cuff and hidden decreases to bring the pattern all the way to the fluffy pom-pom on its crown.

## Size

To fit newborn baby to toddler  
Finished Measurement  
Circumference: 14  $\frac{3}{4}$ "

## Materials



- Dale of Norway *Baby Ull* (100% superwash merino wool; 180 yds/50g per ball)  
1 ball Soft Yellow #2203
- Size 2 (2.75mm) double-pointed needles (set of 5) and two 16" circular needles, or size needed to obtain gauge
- Small crochet hook
- Stitch markers, 1 in CC for beg of rnd
- Tapestry needle
- Pom-pom maker (optional)

## Gauge

26 sts and 48 rnds = 4" (10cm) in pat st.  
*Adjust needle size as necessary to obtain correct gauge.*