

Creativity in Knitted Textiles - Special Issue TEXTILE

A designer's perspective on a creative era in knitwear design: British fashion knitwear 1970 -1990

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Abstract

The image of knitting has waxed and waned throughout its history across the UK, being historically associated with women's domestic work. Nevertheless, hand knitting has demonstrated periods of great creativity and fashionability since the mid-19th century. The 20th century saw knitting move from the utility of wartime comforts for the troops, to high fashion in the 1920s and 1930s and again in the 1950s, but by the late 1960s hand-knitted clothes were seen as utilitarian and staid.

However, from the early 1970s, a new wave of British designer/makers rediscovered the creative potential of knitting; traditional techniques were reinterpreted with colour and pattern in a true renaissance of the art. This significant craft-led British design movement repositioned knitwear as fashion, and a new genre "designer knitwear" was born, named a "Knitwear Revolution" by fashion writer Suzy Menkes. This hand-made, textural, colourful, fun knitwear became highly popular "statement" fashion.

This article makes an original contribution to fashion and knitwear history by examining this under-researched period, including through personal testimony of the author. It provides new insights into creative approaches to knitwear design and business practices exemplified by British designer fashion knitwear of the 1970s and 80s and identifies the lasting influence of these small design-led businesses.

Keywords: designer fashion knitwear; creativity in knitwear design; hand knitting; intarsia colour work; cottage industry; machine knitting.

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Introduction

This article takes as its focus the innovative wave of British designer knitwear that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s and discusses the creative approaches taken towards knitwear design and small business by designers of the period (including the author) and the revival of cottage industry production methods. Although three texts on the history of hand knitting were published in the late 1980s and early 1990s, knitwear's position in relation to fashion is still an under-researched area, in particular its design and realisation. Key historical texts are: *A History of Hand Knitting* (1987) by Richard Rutt, focused especially on the British Isles and the history of pattern publications, including brief mention of contemporary designer Patricia Roberts; *No Idle Hands* (1988) by Anne MacDonald on the social history of American knitting; and *History of Knitting Before Mass Production* (1991) by Irena Turnau on the European and British history of knitting before mechanisation of the craft. Further technical histories trace the development of the machine-made knitwear industry (see Millington and Chapman 1989, Chapman 2002 for overviews). This discussion of 1970s and 1980s fashion knitwear builds on the author's own previous experience as a knitwear designer and as a scholar contributing to the history of knitwear design and development. *Knitwear in Fashion* (Black 2002) and *Knitting: Fashion, Industry, Craft* (Black 2012) briefly introduced this fashion knitwear phenomenon firstly in the context of knitwear design, fashion and innovation in the later 20th century, and secondly in relation to the wider historical evolution of hand and industrial knitting for domestic and commercial production and consumption.

The designers of the 1970s and early 1980s approached hand knitting with a respect for its heritage but also an open, experimental and often playful attitude – combining texture, colour and visual inspiration drawn from any aspect of their world such as nature, or the fine and decorative arts. They found a new creative expression through a synthesis of natural materials, stitch construction, multi-colour graphic patterns and relaxed form on the body. In what follows, new insights are provided into the creative design and business practices of a group of British designers that has been overlooked by the many published fashion histories, but who nevertheless had a considerable creative impact on fashion and the knitwear industry, with a legacy beyond the immediate timeframe through publications and market and technical stimulus. Since the turn of the millennium, appreciation of the skill, satisfaction and empowerment in making has grown, with knitting a leading practice (see for example Gschwandtner 2007). As the DIY, craftivist (Greer 2014) and maker movements have continued to develop both online and offline through knitting and craft groups, it is timely to look back at the creative period of knit craft that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and examine some of the design-led businesses that inspired a keen public following and repositioned hand-made knitting and knitwear as fashionable.

The few prior research studies on knitwear design, focus on the industrial context for knitwear design practice, education and production, including creative processes and inspiration of knitwear designers in commercial industry (Eckert 1997, Eckert and Stacey

2001, 2003a, 2003b; Eckert, Stacey and Wiley 2002); technological developments (Sayer, Wilson and Challis 2006) and more recently knitting education in the context of the Italian knitwear industry (Motta 2019). Eckert's work takes an engineering design approach, seeking to model design processes for effectiveness in a commercial mass production context, whereas this article discusses designers working as independent micro and small craft-based businesses. With regard to home knitting, Cally Blackman (1998) explored the transition from utilitarian and wartime hand knitting to the knitting of fashionable items in the period 1908-1939 through the work of pioneering knitwear designer Marjory Tillotson, designer of knitting patterns for British yarn manufacturers. With a rare focus on the 1980s, Jade Halbert (2018) contrasted the opportunities, barriers and experience of a machine knitter working at home trying to start a creative business in the 1980s to that of a designer knitwear business of today, with the advantage of digital communication technologies. Joanne Turney's comprehensive 2009 study *The Culture of Knitting* takes a theoretical perspective, applying different lenses to examine the broader cultural contexts in which diverse practices of (mainly hand) knitting have operated since 1970, including feminism and postmodernism. Turney characterises knitting in the 1980s as part of a British "design confusion" (61) looking simultaneously forward and back. Although acknowledging that "Indeed, knit was at its most exciting during this period.... By the mid-1980s knitwear designers were household names, publishing books of knitting patterns and selling kits to make up at home" (101), there is no detailed discussion of the subject. Only one knitwear designer (Kaffe Fassett) mentioned in this article features in Turney's text; her discussion of fashion knitwear focusses more on high fashion designers utilising knitwear, citing designers featured in *Knitwear in Fashion* (Black 2002).

The skills and creativity required to design knitwear and execute pattern, structure and complex shaping (often at the same time) have been overlooked and undervalued in histories and scholarship about textiles and fashion. This article addresses this gap in relation to a specific period of innovation in the fashion market. It takes both a narrative and autoethnographic approach (Kara 2015, Cresswell and Cresswell 2018), from a practitioner perspective, based on close reading of knitting publications, personal archive material including contemporary articles and exhibition catalogues, and the study of knitwear artefacts held in the V&A Museum. These resources are brought together with the author's personal experience, as a knitwear designer of the period, and contemporary knowledge, as an "insider" (Hayano 1979), of a network of British independent knitwear designers to identify their business and creative practices. As such, this article applies autoethnographic research, i.e., "highly personal accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding" (Sparkes 2000, 21), as employed in various disciplines, to the study of fashion knitwear considered as a creative industry. The article thus contributes knowledge to the business and operational history of small design-led fashion knitwear enterprises in the 1970s and 1980s.

Knitting design and creativity

The study of creativity is a complex area of research across disciplines with an extensive literature both philosophical and pragmatic, beyond the scope of this article (e.g.

Csikszentmihalyi 1997). Kharkhurin (2014) proposes a construct based on four criteria: novelty, utility, aesthetics and authenticity, that resonates with the praxis discussed here. In the current context of knitwear, designers' creativity embraces novelty by being open to new ideas through curiosity, imagination, vision and intuition; experimenting to develop new concepts and methods; making new connections between existing traditions or ways of working, and applying these in novel ways; and having the confidence, knowledge and skills to execute new ideas.

I characterise knitting as a form of soft engineering, with endless possibilities for shape, texture and form - a perfect combination of creative, mathematical and technical skills, requiring both vision and a practical ability to trial and implement new concepts. Knitting design and development is a hybrid of textiles and fashion. In fashion, two-dimensional (2D) textiles (created from yarns) are translated to three-dimensional (3D) form via 2D pattern templates. Alternatively fashion garments can be conceived in 3D by draping textiles on a mannequin and then translating the information into 2D patterns, a process associated with high fashion and couture creations. In critical contrast, knitted construction enables both a textile and 3D garment form to be constructed *simultaneously* and also seamlessly (if required) directly from one or more yarns. Many items such as socks, hats, gloves and ganseys (fishermen's knitted sweaters) are distinctively knitted "in the round" i.e. in one 3D piece and shaped to fit the body through techniques of selectively knitting, increasing or decreasing stitches. As an alternative approach, 2D garment sections with finished edges can be knitted precisely to the shape required (simple or complex) and then **joined together using special machinery**. This is termed "fully fashioned" production in the industry in contrast to the "cut and sew" method.

An understanding of creating with knitted stitches has to be gained by working directly with yarn and needles, or with a manually operated knitting machine. The fundamental structures of hand and machine knitting¹ are identical, although arrived at through different means with just a few fundamental loop formations irrespective of whether created by hand or on a machine needlebed.² From this simple basis, with or without the introduction of colour, an infinite variety of combinations and patterns is possible, keeping the skill and creativity of knitting alive to the imagination. When teaching knitwear design at undergraduate level I encouraged an experimental approach to developing ideas using a wide range of visual inspiration for colour and texture, and envisaging structure and shapes in relation to the body, utilising the qualities of stretch, drape and flexibility inherent to knitted construction, whether by hand or machine. I would suggest the students imagine what can be created *because* it is knitted and not *despite* it being knitted. In this way, with deep and tacit understanding of knit construction gained through practice, unique creative outcomes can be achieved. As Dormer (1997) noted:

¹ Machine knitting here refers to weft knitting machinery from simple domestic to industrial flat and circular machines, and not the industrial-only process of warp knitting which is based on different principles, using a warp beam and created from interlinked vertical chain loops.

² For more technical information see Brackenbury (1992) *Knitted Clothing Technology*

The possession and practice of practical know-how has, like the acquisition of other forms of knowledge, the potential to be open-ended – you keep finding new ways of doing things and new applications for the things that you do. (Dormer, 147)

From the knitwear designer's viewpoint, sweaters, jackets, cardigans and coats provided a blank surface to be filled with graphic imagery and/or stitch textures interplaying together, with infinite variations and adaptability. Many designers combined visual elements and textural stitches in novel and witty ways, creating a signature recognisable style, a unique handwriting. A good knowledge of knit construction is required to successfully translate ideas and imagery into the correct proportion for the knitted stitches. For each concept, trialling of the knitted effects is carried out in preliminary knit swatches, before translation into complete garments and a harmonious composition, taking a 360° approach, especially across seams. Attention to detail and mathematical precision related to the "tension" or "gauge"³ of the knitted fabric are key requirements for correct sizing in knitwear design and production, particularly in hand knitting, where different knitters' work can vary a great deal including in response to an individual's emotional state.

Garment proportions and trims are vital aspects of fashion design, and many designers of the period took advantage of the drape and flexibility of knitted fabric by using simplified geometric shapes for sweaters based on rectangles with dropped shoulders, eliminating the need for sleeve head and armhole shaping, as required in standard pattern cutting techniques for non-stretch woven fabrics. Many garments were oversized to create a relaxed mood and provide a sizeable canvas for design creativity with imagery and pattern. A notable exception was the approach of Marion Foale (see below), who worked with precise three-dimensional integral shaping for a more tailored fit, each garment using just a single colour (with the occasional exception of simple stripes). In what follows several designer knitwear business examples are discussed following an overview of the trajectory and status of knitting in the 20th century.

Twentieth Century Fashion and the Knitwear Revolution

The 20th century saw a number of peaks and troughs in the popularity and fashionability of hand knitting as the craft moved from the utility of domestic necessity (keeping heads, hands, body and feet warm) or wartime calls for comforts for the troops, to key periods of high fashion (MacDonald 1988; Black 2002). In the early 1920s a fashion was set for handknitted Fair Isle jumpers as sportswear for both men and women, when the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) was seen wearing one to play golf. (Duke of Windsor 1960, cited in Rutt 1987, 181). These highly prized handknitted garments were in demand in the fashionable London market, due to their unique design and provenance and Fair Isle jumpers featured regularly in *Punch* magazine cartoons of the period.⁴ Through the 1920s

³ These terms are equivalent in usage, and refer to the number of knitted stitches and rows in a given measurement (usually 10cm/4 in).

⁴ For example, a cartoon in *Punch* 11 Feb 2025 shows men and women playing golf, all wearing similar clothes including Fair Isle sweaters. A male golfer addresses a woman commenting on female

and 30s, colourful new “jazz” patterns were widely adopted (Fig. 1), and jumper knitting became a craze, fuelled by Hollywood stars promoting knitting (MacDonald 1988, 265-8; Blackman 1998). New “artificial silk” (rayon) yarns were promoted in knitting patterns for fashionably relaxed home knitted sweaters and dresses. Despite rationing during and after World War Two (1939-45), the technical skill and ingenuity of hand knitters enabled the creation of new knitted garments for all the family from old worn-out pieces or using wool rations, with a plethora of patterns published to support their efforts. For example, flattering slim-fitting women’s sweaters minimised yarn and complemented the tailored style of uniforms. After the war, hand knitted fashion peaked again in the 1950s, inspired by the casual but appealing figure-hugging glamour of the “sweater girls” wearing skirts and knitted tops, as seen in Hollywood films. (Black 2002, 2012, Stanley 2002). However by the early 1970s hand knitting was again thought of as a largely utilitarian, somewhat staid, element of everyday basic family clothing (Fig 2). In the same period, commercial knitwear in Britain was a parallel industry to fashion, comprising plain sweaters and cardigans, underwear and hosiery, only rarely intersecting with fashionability (such as luxury cashmere beaded cardigans), unlike notable Italian and French designers Missoni, Krizia, Kenzo and Sonia Rykiel who made waves in the 1970s with their colourful “knit dressing” (see Black 2002).

[Insert Fig 1 1930s Jazz knitting pattern]

[Insert Fig 2 1970s knitting pattern]

The innovative youthful spirit that had re-energised British fashion in the 1960s, with pioneering designers including Mary Quant, Ossie Clark, Barbara Hulanicki for Biba and Foale & Tuffin, seemed to leave knitwear behind. However, from the mid 1970s, in tandem with a wider resurgence of interest in crafts, handmade items and natural materials— a backlash against uninteresting mass production and synthetics - a new wave of British designer/makers (mostly women) rediscovered the creative potential of knitting. In the context of the cultural and political shifts of the time they looked afresh at a traditional craft still associated with wartime austerity and older generations (Turney 2009, Peach 2013). As is commonplace in fashion cycles, what was formerly considered old-fashioned could, after a suitable period, be revitalised and re-interpreted. Inspiration was found in Mary Thomas’ 1938 knitting compendium of stitches and historical items (Thomas 1987 [1938]) and in 1930s and ‘40s knitting patterns (for example Jane Waller’s 1972 collection *A Stitch in Time*). The knitting stitch “bibles” published between 1968 and 1972 by American knitter and stitch pattern taxonomist Barbara Walker were especially inspirational.⁵ Designers began to experiment with the endless possibilities of knitted stitch combinations, adding colour,

precociousness: “*Diehard (stroking his beard)*: ‘My dear girl, it’s our only chance left. As soon as you can imitate this we’re done’ “

⁵ Between 1968 and 1972 Walker published three key collections of knitting stitch patterns and textures with images and instructions, containing over 1500 stitch variations: *A Treasury of Knitting Patterns* (1968), *A Second Treasury of Knitting Patterns* (1970), *Charted Knitting Patterns* (1972). All have since been reprinted.

pattern and imagery to the mix. The creative freedom and experimentation encouraged in UK art college education at that time also played a key role. Some designers had studied textiles, fine art, or fashion at college, others (including the author) studied unrelated subjects and were completely self-taught in knitting and design. Techniques and stitches were reinterpreted and recombined in what might be termed a “postmodern bricolage” approach by inventively incorporating novel colour and design inspirations into expressive visual and tactile pieces, using natural materials, in a renaissance of the art and craft of knitting. Taken together a new genre of “designer knitwear” was born. This was a craft-led creative design movement that for a new generation repositioned knitwear as covetable fashion, rather than utilitarian or functional basics. This significant British designer knitwear phenomenon was called a “Knitwear Revolution” by respected fashion writer Suzy Menkes in her book of the same name⁶ (Menkes 1983). It was a rare accolade for knitwear to be dealt with seriously in terms of fashion (Fig. 3). Menkes, then fashion editor of *The Times*, stated:

The current renaissance of knitting reflects absolutely the changing status of women. From subservient wife knitting balaclavas for the troops (and later knitting for victory), we now have a creative flowering of hand knitting that has become high fashion and a serious commercial business.

This book is about the people behind the knitwear revolution. To be more precise it is a book about women, for the designers who have transformed knitwear from the dull necessities of winter woollies to the imaginative elegant and even amusing garments, are almost entirely female. They are also British, for knitting is one fashion area where Britain unequivocally leads the world, partly because of our traditional skill with the needles, passed down from the generation of Fair Isle knitters, partly because of art school training which has encouraged students to stretch the boundaries of knitting beyond slipovers and stocking stitch. (Menkes 1983, 8)

[insert Figure 3 The Knitwear Revolution book 1983]

The strength of the designer knitwear movement in this period was also acknowledged by two important exhibitions solely dedicated to knitting. *The Knitwear Revue* by the British Craft Centre London toured 12 UK venues in 1983-4, exhibiting knitwear from 28 designers. *Knitting a Common Art*, curated by historian June Freeman for The Minories Colchester and Aberystwyth Crafts Centre (supported by the Crafts Council), toured to five UK venues in 1986-7, exhibiting work from 43 contemporary knitwear designers alongside historical knitted pieces (Fig. 4). Freeman importantly acknowledged the makers’ context and their creativity by naming them all, stating:

⁶ *The Knitwear Revolution: Designer Patterns to Make* (1983) by Suzy Menkes featured 30 knitting patterns designed by 20 fashion and knitwear designers including Patricia Roberts, Bill Gibb, Zandra Rhodes, Jean Muir, Susan Duckworth, Kaffe Fassett and Artwork. Sandy Black’s Vase of Flowers coat featured on the cover.

My hope is that by enjoying this exhibition, people may begin to reconsider some common assumptions about the distribution of creative imagination and artistic talent in our society. ... Few art forms have had as bad an image [as knitting]. At one time to knit was synonymous, for many, with being dull and dreary..... By placing the work from the current knitting revival alongside the work of past knitters, the exhibition begins to tell a story.... a story which makes us see current knitting as more than the outcome of an art school training, or a matter of fashion. Behind any work of art is a person and a society. (Freeman 1986, 7).

[insert Figure 4 Knitting a Common Art exhibition catalogue 1986]

This revolution in knitwear was powered by both hand craft, using knitting needles, and manually operated domestic knitting machines, to achieve unique effects. It is important to note that at the time, it was not possible to make such complex knitwear industrially, as commercial knitting machinery used in factory production was geared to producing large quantities of basic plain garments (or with limited patterning), and did not yet have the technical capacity to produce the combinations of colour patterns, structural stitches and multiple textures invented by the designer-knitters. Importantly, designers found factory managers were largely unwilling (due to time constraints) to experiment with new ideas or work with small orders, and hand craft-based cottage industry production therefore enabled far more flexibility and scope for creativity in design and construction. In terms of industrial production, only the exceptional Missoni fashion knitwear house in Italy seemed able to translate its founders' creative vision into colourful and complex industrial machine-knitted fabrics (mostly using multicolour jacquard techniques). These fabrics were however cut out and made up in the same manner as woven fabrics for fashion, a "cut and sew" process very different from hand-crafted knitwear production where each garment piece is knitted to the exact required shape, i.e. "fully fashioned", without waste.

Crucially for the new genre of designer fashion knitwear, the leading designer-knitters were also practitioners of the craft. They interpreted visual inspiration from a wide range of sources combining creative and inventive knitted stitch structures, yarn textures, innovative use of colour and often quirky graphic patterns, and importantly, visualised these elements as 3D form on the body. Each designer developed their signature visual language, with individual combinations of colour, texture, graphic motifs, and shapes. This style of hand-made, textural, colourful and fun fashion knitwear became highly popular, as evidenced by increasing press and broadcast media coverage⁷, and growth in demand experienced by knitwear designers for both readymade garments and patterns for publication in magazines and books. This demand influenced the wider industry, by opening up a market for "statement" knitwear that helped to push the industry further. Machine manufacturers began to develop digitally-controlled knitting technology and programming systems to specifically enhance creative design capability. For example, in 1987 leading manufacturer

⁷ For example: Angela Neustatter, "Purl Ardour" *The Guardian* Fashion (1975 September 30); Brenda Polan 'Knit picking', *The Guardian* (1980, November 12); "Pick of the Knits" *The Financial Times* How to Spend It. (1983 January 29); *Glorious Colour* with Kaffe Fassett Autumn 1986 Channel 4 Television.

Stoll (based in Germany) launched the first machine able to simultaneously knit intarsia, knitted gores, and fully fashioned garment pieces.⁸ After further developments, during the 1990s, the Australian Coogi Knitwear brand created a range of complex industrially knitted multi-coloured sweaters using multiple structures and patterns, a speciality the brand recently revived for menswear in 2022.⁹

Designer Knitwear Business

As acknowledged by Suzy Menkes, a distinction can be made between designers who were purely knitwear specialists (such as Patricia Roberts, Sasha Kagan and Sandy Black), and those fashion designers whose collections included knitwear as part of their style (such as Bill Gibb, BodyMap and Jasper Conran). The specialist knitwear design businesses operated at different levels of production – firstly the smallest businesses who were often individual designer/makers working as sole traders and who made to order or commission, and secondly those working at a bigger scale, wholesaling to retail outlets large and small. The latter group (as in my own business) operated within the fashion industry system, working to twice-yearly seasonal cycles of showcasing collections internationally at the fashion trade fairs to obtain orders which were then fulfilled by batch production, using outworkers making in their own homes. The majority of these businesses worked with hand-knitted production, some managing several hundred knitters or more (often via agents who managed their own teams of knitters), plus a small number of designers working with domestic knitting machine production. Unusually, my own business worked with both types of production, by hand and on manual domestic machines.

Reacting to the blandness of much commercial knitwear design, the designer knitwear of the 1970s and 1980s focused on the blending of colour, texture, pattern and scale to create each individual design, whether a bold geometric design, a pretty floral or from any other visual inspiration, such as kelims (hand-woven rugs)¹⁰, ceramics or bric-a-brac. Several names emerged, each with their distinctive design repertoire and colourful yarn palettes, including Patricia Roberts, Kaffe Fassett, Susan Duckworth, Artwork by Jane and Patrick Gottelier, Jamie and Jessie Seaton, Sasha Kagan, Vanessa Keegan, Jenny Kiernan, Warm and Wonderful (later Muir and Osborne), Marion Foale, Martin Kidman for Joseph Tricot and Sandy Black. Designer knitwear products fell into a unique genre, simultaneously craft and fashion, which had previously been seen as incompatible, and gained a large following in many countries. This distinctiveness was reflected as part of the contemporary fashion

⁸ See Stoll company history: <https://www.stoll.com: Milestones / History | COMPANY | STOLL> (accessed 1.12.22)

⁹ For an example of Coogi complex colour and texture-patterned sweaters see Black (2002, 21), for revival in 2022 see <https://coogi.com The Official Site - COOGI Authentic Sweaters> (accessed 10.10.22)

¹⁰ A type of tapestry-woven patterned woollen carpet typically made in Turkey and other countries including Afghanistan and Pakistan, with colourful geometric patterns, easily interpreted in colour-block knitting.

zeitgeist and a new multi-label London fashion and knitwear catwalk show was established in 1979 named The Individual Clothes Show, in parallel to the existing London Designer Collections that featured single designer-label catwalk shows.¹¹ The Individual Clothes Show thus provided marketing opportunities normally beyond the means of up and coming small and micro fashion businesses. British designer knitwear was showcased in a global marketplace, at the international fashion trade fairs (London, Paris, Milan, New York and Tokyo) sometimes with the assistance of travel grants from the British Knitting Export Council, as export sales were highly significant to the sector. For example, over 90% of Sandy Black sales were exported. Overseas buyers, especially from prestigious department stores in America and Japan (such as Saks Fifth Avenue, Bloomingdales, Bullocks, Takashimaya and Isetan), rushed to snap up original knitwear designed and made in the UK, a fact which was proudly displayed on their labels - Saks Fifth Avenue even set up a new retail line called "Sweaters as Art" (Fig.5). Sales were also made to many boutiques and independent stores across the US (such as Henri Bendel, Betsey Bunky Nini), the UK (such as Browns, Phase 8), Australia, Canada and to several European countries.

[insert Fig 5 US Store labels]

Running a design-led creative business was not easy, as the wholesale market could be fickle; designers had to invest first in creating a complete sample collection, market the collection at trade fairs and/or with sales agents, then finance production of orders and eventually, months after delivery, possibly be paid - an issue that still persists in contemporary design-led fashion businesses. The whole cycle could take a year, and even then, some customers defaulted on payments, with very little redress for the business. Many designers were micro or small businesses with few direct employees, but reliant on teams of outworkers, large and small. They usually worked with family partners, for example husband and wife teams Artwork, the Seatons, Susan Duckworth, or brother and sister team at Patricia Roberts. In most cases, the women worked as the main designer, and the men supported mainly on the business side. Without such family support and commitment it could be very hard to manage an innovative design-led business whilst maintaining creative integrity, with most designers and partners taking a very small wage from the business, and many also guest teaching in higher education or taking on consultancy to supplement income and cash flow problems.

Due to the hand-made nature of designer knitwear (either created on needles or by manually operated domestic knitting machines), the selling prices charged by fashion retailers (based on an average 300% markup on wholesale prices) were in the £300-£500 price bracket for a sweater (about four times higher in today's prices) and much more for the evening coats in my Sandy Black range that retailed at around £1000. The designers' high end ready-to-wear collections created publicity and demand from home knitters for

¹¹ Examples of the Individual Clothes Show catwalks are available to subscribers to Bloomsbury Fashion Central visual archives at <https://www.bloomsburyfashioncentral.com>

similar looks at lower prices and several designers - pioneered by Patricia Roberts, and including Kaffe Fassett (working with Rowan Yarns¹²), and Sandy Black - started to sell their own branded yarns and pattern kits via department stores and by mail order for people to knit the designs themselves. These kits found a new and different market, giving consumers access to high fashion knitwear at a fraction of the ready-made retail price (but discounting the labour cost), for those who could knit already, were willing to learn to knit themselves, or could find a family member to knit for them (still a possibility in the 1980s). Other designers such as Sasha Kagan supplied mail order knitting packs using Rowan or other yarns, and for a time in the late 1980s via Ehrmann Tapestry Kits, who branched out into knitting kits in collaboration with Rowan. This new marketing strategy, supplying complete kits with exactly the right quantities of yarns to knit a multi-coloured garment, were far more convenient for consumers than searching out colours separately, and importantly the integrity of the designer's vision was maintained. The following sections discuss in more detail the work of selected knitwear designers already mentioned, illustrating individual approaches and contexts, and starting with my own story.

A personal story

Having learnt to knit and crochet as a child, taught by my mother and grandmother, I loved to make things for myself. My interest in hand knitting (and crochet) was revived whilst studying mathematics at university, as a practical way to make interesting and unusual clothes, and I was regularly seen knitting in public whilst travelling and especially around the campus - much to the amusement of everyone. "My gran knits!" was a regular jibe, as knitting was thought to be so old-fashioned then. I was especially interested in graphic patterns and imagery, having made the connection at an early stage between the knitted stitch and designing with the squares of my graph paper. I saved up for a simple single bed domestic knitting machine and the creative juices soon flowed. I was quickly able to experiment with many manual machine processes, particularly the labour-intensive "intarsia" technique - the knitting equivalent of tapestry weaving - which enabled me to create complex knitted imagery, specialising in landscapes and skyscapes. I liked to paint pictures with stitches, working with the body as a canvas for both large-scale non-repeating and smaller-scale designs with repeated elements. The landscape sweaters certainly owed something to the "painting by numbers" kits that I had enjoyed as a child. As a self-taught designer I had the benefit of not being constrained by existing rules - in my mind anything could be translated into knitting. It was simply a question of visualizing an idea (based on inspirational sources and personal photography) and then working out the logic of how to make it. From the mid 1970s, through the 1980s and into the 1990s, I ran my Sandy Black Original Knits designer knitwear label, producing one-off commissions, knitting patterns, fashion collections and Sandy Black knitting yarn kits that were sold internationally in major fashion stores worldwide.

¹² Rowan Yarns were significant in the designer hand knitwear sector, see profiles of both Kaffe Fassett and Rowan Yarns below.

Initially working from a studio in a former grain warehouse on the River Thames in south-east London (premises that enabled start-up craft businesses, run as a cooperative by its multi-disciplinary occupants), I built up a group of private clients and undertook commissions for television and theatre productions, making everything myself, including knitwear, cushions, rugs and special promotions, such as an 8-metre long knitted history of the universe, created to promote Courtaulds Courtelle Yarns (Black 2021). I worked both with handknitting and on domestic knitting machines as appropriate to the ideas or commission, developing many manual techniques and interventions on the machine, such as making three-dimensional “bobbles”. In this early period, I also created designs and wrote many knitting patterns for a range of women’s fashion and craft magazines and started selling my designs to specialist boutiques. Media attention increased steadily, including press articles and radio and television appearances. As orders built up, I moved to making small batch production using a core team of 25 trusted outworkers, knitting in their own homes, most in the southern Greater London area, and a few in Yorkshire. In the manner of the earliest knitting industry, the business became a cottage industry with both hand and domestic machine knitters, the latter using their own knitting machines (which were often neglected gifts), although the business loaned some accessories. All the knitters were keen to work on creative projects and learn new techniques. I was proud of building a strong relationship with each of the knitters, visiting the majority in person, paying the highest rates for their work as feasible (whilst still being able to sell the knitwear) and thus creating a loyal team of skilled hand and machine knitters paid above average rates – a fact I discovered through the knitwear designer network. I also developed links with the local polytechnic textile department to take paid interns on work placements, to mutual benefit. I was joined by my partner Kevin Bolger, who helped run the business, and we moved to larger premises where the studio team grew, with two regular sample machine knitters, a pattern writer and always a student on paid placement.

At first, this new style of knitwear was not fully understood by some store buyers - too craft-based for fashion, and too fashion-oriented for the crafts market - but by the start of the 1980s, the Sandy Black Original Knits collections of sweaters, cardigans, and glamorous evening coats were selling in prestigious fashion outlets in the UK and America, and the business had expanded considerably. For larger orders, our small team of hand and machine knitters was supplemented by working with an intermediate agent who distributed our instructions and yarns to their own groups of hand knitters based in rural Cornwall; in these cases I had no direct contact with the knitters, and quality and sizing could occasionally be an issue. We continued to show seasonal knitwear collections at the bi-annual international fashion fairs in Milan, London, New York and Tokyo for six years, exporting to major fashion stores throughout the world, especially in America and Japan, plus Italy, Germany, Australia and Canada.

Having previously designed and produced collections of patterns and leaflets for the French yarn company Georges Picaud, from 1982 we took the bold step of producing a range of Sandy Black yarns and colours, translating the colourful ready-to-wear designs into multicoloured knitting yarn kits in wool, mohair, cotton or pure angora with patterns for

home knitters to create themselves (Fig. 6). The knitting kits sold in department stores and individual wool shops throughout the UK and in the US, Australia and Germany, plus by mail order. In response to a growing demand for designer knitting pattern books, *Sandy Black Original Knitting*, was published in 1987, collecting 20 designs under four themes – Graphic, Floral, Heraldic and Ornamental - and including modular coats made from separately knitted “tiles” sewn together (Fig 7). Rowan Yarns later took on the production of the Sandy Black Wool Twist 100% wool textured yarn and produced four “Sandy Black for Rowan” knitting kits from the Heraldic collection that had received a Design Council award in 1984. The Sandy Black knitting kits business continued until the early 1990s.

[insert Fig 6 Sandy Black Lion and Unicorn design)

[insert Fig 7 Sandy Black Original Knits book featuring modular design coat]

Knitwear Designers and the Home Knitting and Publishing Boom

As a testament to the popularity of fashionable hand knitting with the general public by the late 1970s and early 1980s, designer knitting patterns regularly featured in monthly fashion magazines such as *Elle*, *Honey*, *Company*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Over 21*, alongside their main fashion coverage, and knitwear articles and pattern offers were also featured in weekday and weekend newspapers including the *Guardian*, *Times*, *Financial Times* (*How to Spend It* supplement), *Sunday Telegraph* and *Sunday Times*. This phenomenon contrasted with the regular, more mundane knitting patterns for the family, that had featured in women’s weekly magazines since their inception, including *Woman’s Weekly*, *Woman’s Own* and *Woman*, (launched in 1911, 1932 and 1937 respectively). However, they too began to be influenced by contemporary fashion – indeed my own venture into Sandy Black pattern and yarn kits began with a highly successful “special offer” designer kit commissioned for *Woman* magazine in 1982 (now in the V&A collection)¹³ (Fig. 8).

[Insert Fig 8 Sandy Black Fairisle Fun sweater and knitting kit]

In response to the new hand knitting boom, several compilation books of designer patterns were produced for the home knitting market throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Four years before *The Knitwear Revolution* mentioned above, the influential book *Wild Knitting* (Jeffs 1979) had commissioned innovative, fun and experimental items for its pages, with an irreverent approach designed to inspire a younger generation of beginner knitters to start creating (Fig. 9). Its editor Angela Jeffs noted:

For years knitting has had a dowdy image. An abundance of old-fashioned patterns, uninviting yarns, and a surfeit of cheap, mass produced knitwear have all contributed to a bleak, boring and uncreative outlook. Now change is on the way. Beautiful exciting yarns are appearing on the market, young designers are looking at the craft in a different light,

¹³ The V&A Collection holds a Sandy Black Fairisle Fun multi-colour mohair sweater and knitting kit (acquisition numbers T.64-1999 & T.65-1999)

suddenly handknitting is news. This book sets out to reflect the revolutionary mood in an age-old craft. (Jefferies 1979, 6)

[insert Fig 9 Wild Knitting book cover 1979.]

Wild Knitting has stood the test of time and still inspires knitters today, with its varied and creative designs including colourful sweaters and dungarees, ragbag top, romantic or sexy evening wear, wacky ties, knitted crown jewels, and my own “armadillo wrap”. Following these and other compilations, more individual designers began to produce their own books of patterns, capitalising on this new form of direct marketing for their designer brand, that reached a different consumer interested in high fashion knitwear than the high-end fashion retailers and department stores selling ready-to-wear items in a luxury price bracket.

Patricia Roberts

Patricia Roberts was a pioneering designer, the first to produce a new style of fashion knitwear collections; she also spotted a gap in the home knitting market for high quality yarns and fashion-forward patterns from the early 1970s. Having trained in fashion, specialising in knitwear, she worked as a knitting editor for several mainstream women’s weekly magazines before launching her own handmade knitwear label in 1971 featuring colourful, inventive (and often intensive) textural stitch and pattern combinations. These included recoloured Fair Isle designs and the well-known Fruit Machine design with bunches of grapes and cherries, adapted from a classic Aran-style textured bobble stitch with colour and humour. Roberts produced her first booklet of 20 designer patterns in 1975 and went on to publish a further 10 booklets of designs almost annually throughout the 1980s. These were collected into 4 hardback pattern books including *Patricia Roberts Knitting Book* (1981) and *Patricia Roberts Collection* (1985) (Fig. 10). Roberts was the only knitwear designer to open her own knitwear and knitting yarn shops in central London, (three established in 1976, 1979 and 1982) with her brand Woollybear yarns, filling the gap in availability of high quality natural yarns in cotton, wool, silk, cashmere and angora. Recognised as a “knitter’s knitter” for the intricacy of her designs in relatively fine yarns, Roberts’ often complex stitch combinations (e.g. multiple bobbles plus intarsia motifs) were both challenging and rewarding, requiring considerable investment of time to knit. Roberts set the bar for repositioning the image of knitting as fashion by working with stylist Caroline Baker, who had pioneered a new and unconventional style of fashion editorial shoot at *Nova* magazine in the early 1970s that became known as “street style” (Webb 2021). This featured designer clothes eclectically styled with everyday clothes, in relaxed or provocative poses, fuelling the success of 1980s contemporary lifestyle titles including *i-D* and *The Face*. Patricia Roberts’ books made knitwear once again fashionable through editorial-style photography and innovative, distinctive and often quirky designs. In an interview for the V&A Museum website, she said of her creative process:

Inspiration comes from anything and everything – an old cake tin from a flea market, nature, or even just from designing. The more you invent stitches, the more eloquent you become and the further you can push them.¹⁴

[insert Fig 10 Patricia Roberts Knitting Book 1981]

Awarded the Duke of Edinburgh's Designer Award in 1986, she published books of patterns for home knitters until the early 1990s and continued to sell her ready-made knitwear internationally into the 2000s. The reach of the business extended to the opening of Patricia Roberts franchised shops in Hong Kong and Melbourne.¹⁵

Artwork

The Artwork label began in 1977, co-founded by Jane Foster and Patrick Gottelier. The couple met at art college (where Jane studied fashion and Patrick industrial design) and as the brand name indicates, their first sweater collection was inspired by artists such as Miro and Picasso, with graphic patterns worked in intarsia technique. Co-incidentally, a similar artists theme was later used by Martin Kidman for his 1985 undergraduate collection, which brought him to the attention of influential fashion retailer Joseph Ettedgui. Kidman was immediately hired as knitwear designer for the Joseph Tricot line, straight from college (see Fig 13).

Rather than focus on stitch techniques, Artwork took a thematic approach to their knitwear collections, often based on Foster's research into historical dress and museum collections, building on her previous work as a costume designer. They experimented with different decorative effects including reviving beaded knitting. For example, their 1981 Egyptian collection sweaters incorporated yokes with large multi-coloured bugle beads; a Celtic collection utilised beaten metal embellishments. Later they collaborated with a printed textile designer and textile screen-printer to overprint intarsia colour-block knitting with line drawings of Italian architectural imagery¹⁶ (Fig 8). From 1984 Artwork became well known for working with indigo-dyed denim yarn (developed by Rowan Yarns) which they used for a non-seasonal second line George Trowark, made up into fishermen-style ganseys. Always taking a fashion approach, Artwork used teams of knitters in Cornwall and elsewhere, but made up all the knitwear with their in-house team. They also introduced woven separates to complement their knitwear, and trialled knitwear production in Asia, but when this proved unsatisfactory, Artwork returned to its hand knitting roots, and continued in business until 2008.

[insert Fig 11 Artwork printed intarsia knitwear]

¹⁴ Patricia Roberts interview on V&A Museum website [V&A · Interviews With Knit Designers And Textile Artists \(vam.ac.uk\)](https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/interviews-with-knit-designers-and-textile-artists) accessed 3rd Jan 2022

¹⁵ Sadly Patricia Roberts passed away in December 2020.

¹⁶ See also Black (2012: 174)

Marion Foale

In a different vein, Marion Foale, pioneer (with fashion college friend Sally Tuffin) of 1960s youth fashions with their Carnaby Street shop Foale and Tuffin, recognised a gap for classic hand knitwear with a modern twist in the late 1970s market. She began her designer knitwear business somewhat pragmatically as something she could do in tandem with family life. Applying her tailoring knowledge and a three-dimensional approach to design, Foale focused on subtle stitch textures, detailing, and engineered construction (such as knitted-in darts) to create integral tailored shapes perfectly fitted to the body, updating the pared-down look last seen during wartime austerity. The business took off following a *Sunday Times* Colour Supplement free sweater pattern feature, championed by fashion editor Meriel McCooley in February 1981. This stimulated high demand for other designs, and 250 hand knitters were kept busy in production.¹⁷ Foale's stylish monochrome jackets, cardigans and sweaters stood out against the prevailing mood of multi-coloured and graphic designs of other designer knitters of the period. Marion Foale regularly designed knitwear for British fashion brand Margaret Howell and others, in addition to selling her own collection to stockists, becoming contemporary classics that have transcended time. Her 1985 book of patterns *Classic Knitwear* has itself become a classic. Foale handed over the reins of her business to her managing director in 2018.¹⁸

Kaffe Fassett

Kaffe Fassett, a painter turned knitted textile designer, initially developed knitted fabrics for fashion designer Bill Gibb and Italian knitwear design house Missoni, then began to design under his own name, publishing hand knit designs in magazines including *Vogue Knitting* (relaunched in 1982), and notably working with Rowan Yarns as a colour consultant and knitwear designer from its early years. Fassett's ground-breaking *Glorious Knitting* (1985) book reflected his artist's focus on visual ideas for his colourful knitted textile designs, working with up to 20 yarn colours in one piece, always using basic stocking stitch that came alive with intense geometric or floral pattern motifs (Fig. 12). Through sumptuous photography by Steve Lovi, attention was drawn to Fassett's direct visual inspiration, such as decorative ceramics, *objets d'art* and kelims from his own collection, or simply luscious blooms, giving insight into his creative process and inspiring others to create. Fassett, an excellent communicator, promoted creative knitting in regular lectures and workshops plus a television series *Glorious Colour* in 1986 that stimulated great interest and further repeats. As a textile artist and consummate colourist, knitting is only one of Kaffe Fassett's media of creative expression - surface pattern rather than forms for the body are his vocation, therefore other designers, notably Zoe Hunt, collaborated on realising the knitwear garments. Many further books followed *Glorious Knitting's* great success, bringing a similar approach to needlepoint and quilting techniques and creative inspiration: *Glorious*

¹⁷ Charlotte_Cameron, *Knitting Industry Creative* "In Conversation With Marion Foale" 23.05.2018. [In Conversation With Marion Foale | Knitting Industry Creative](#). Accessed 20 Jan 2022.

¹⁸ Jill Geoghegan, *Drapers* 29.09.2018. [Knitwear designer Marion Foale steps down \(drapersonline.com\)](#) Accessed 20 Jan 2022

Needlepoint (1988), *Glorious Colour*(1988), *Glorious Inspirations* (1991) and *Glorious Patchwork*(1997). Working with a close team including designer Brandon Mably, to date 24 quilting books have been produced, and the recent compendium book *Kaffe Fassett in the Studio* (2021) brings together this colourist’s *oeuvre* through the vehicle of his own house and collection, embodying his view that “colour is a life-enhancing force”. Fassett’s work has featured in several solo exhibitions, including at the V&A Museum London (1988) and the Fashion and Textile Museum London (2013 and 2022).¹⁹

[Insert Fig 12 Kaffe Fassett Romeo and Juliet coat 1988]

Sasha Kagan

Sasha Kagan, based in the Welsh countryside and originally trained in printmaking, is known for taking inspiration from her natural surroundings. Many floral and leaf-patterned designs, as well as witty repeating motifs such as the Scottie dog and prowling cat, together with re-worked Fair Isle patterning all feature in Kagan’s relaxed and highly wearable cardigans and sweaters. Her first book of designs *The Sasha Kagan Sweater Book* was produced in 1984, followed by *Big and Little Sweaters* in 1987, creating versions for both adults and children, and she has continued to design and publish pattern collections. *Country Inspirations* (2000) with designs “evocative of the seasons, with roses, autumn leaves, meadow flowers, forest fruits and cottage garden motifs” was accompanied by a display in the V&A Museum (which acquired Kagan’s Hawthorn cardigan for their collection) from September 2000 to June 2001. *The Classic Collection* (2011) is a compilation of four decades of Sasha Kagan’s knitwear designs (Fig. 13). Kagan continues to create and sell her designs and kits from her studio in Wales.

[insert Fig 13 Sasha Kagan Acorn cardigan]

Susan Duckworth

Susan Duckworth, who trained as a painter, brought an artist’s eye to her knitting creations, being particularly known for subtle but richly coloured graphic floral motifs including cabbage roses and pansies, in fine weight yarns (Fig. 14). Different stitch structures and bobbles often featured within her imagery, beyond the classic stocking stitch, creating 3D textural interest. Many designs are intensely detailed with all-over patterning, and others include combinations of coloured floral motifs entwined with background cable or lace stitch structures. With a team of about 200 knitters in the early 1980s, Duckworth produced around 1000 sweaters a year for retail sale (Philips 1980). Her first book of 30 patterns for hand knitters *Susan Duckworth’s Knitting* was published in 1988 (including designs for gloves and socks), followed by *Floral Knitting* in 1992. These designs are still admired and

¹⁹ Kaffe Fassett was the first living textile designer to have a solo exhibition (featuring knitting) at the V&A Museum in London in October to December 1988. The Fashion and Textile Museum London mounted ‘Kaffe Fassett: A Life in Colour’ from March to June 2013 and ‘The Power of Pattern’ from Sept 2022 to March 2023. The latter featured quilts inspired by Fassett and was accompanied by the book *Kaffe Fassett: The Artist’s Eye* (2022) edited by Dennis Nothdruff, Yale University Press: New Haven and London.

created by knitters as evidenced on the online knitting platform Ravelry²⁰ although Duckworth is no longer in the knitwear business.

[Fig 14 Susan Duckworth Butterfly Floral design]

Jamie and Jessie Seaton

Jamie and Jessie Seaton, another team based in Wales and established in 1977, were self-taught in design and business, having both studied architecture and ancient history, and became known for their all-over intricate knitted imagery, often with historical inspiration and mood (including elements drawn from the Bayeux Tapestry). They published *The Seaton Collection* in 1989 featuring sweaters, cardigans and waistcoats using fine yarns and many colours for highly detailed floral and figurative intarsia designs of birds and beasts. After 20 years, and a slowdown from the peak of the hand knitting boom, in 1997 the Seatons decided to pivot their business and launched a range of loungewear – the start of the lifestyle clothing company Toast, known for its quality craftsmanship and understated style.²¹

Vanessa Keegan

In contrast to the above examples, fashion-trained designer Vanessa Keegan only manufactured machine-made knitwear with bold graphic motifs or intarsia colour work as her signature style, including the ironic “Hoover” and “Iron” sweaters for men and women, that made a feminist comment on traditionally women’s work²² and featured in the exhibition *Knitting a Common Art* (see Fig 4). Keegan published *Designer Machine Knitting* (1988) to inspire domestic machine knitters with more contemporary designs, in the belief that “machine knitting frees creative energy and enables the quick exploration of ideas.” (8)

Rowan Yarns

In contrast to the mainstream spinners’ market dominance with easy-care synthetic yarns, Stephen Sheard and Simon Cockin established Rowan Yarns in 1978²³ as suppliers of quality natural yarns in a wide range of colours. As a smaller business in the knitting yarn market, Rowan played a pivotal role in the appeal of British designer knitwear, respecting and meeting the needs of the independent knitwear designers. Working almost exclusively with local Yorkshire spinners and dyers, Rowan provided designers with high quality British-made yarns in exciting yet subtle colour ranges, from classic wools to tweeds, chenilles, mohair, silk and cotton yarns. Several colour ranges were initially created in collaboration with Kaffe Fassett, beginning in 1980 his long and continuing relationship with Rowan that included Kaffe Fassett knitting kits from his *Glorious Knitting* book. Primarily targeting the

²⁰ <https://www.ravelry.com>

²¹ As of September 2022, there are 20 Toast stores across the UK, plus stockists across Europe and in the USA www.toa.st. The Seatons sold their stake and retired from the business in 2018.

²² See *Knitting a Common Art*, exhibition catalogue, by June Freeman (1986)

²³ Rowan Yarns began as Rowan Weavers in 1978, manufacturing woven rugs and selling craft yarns and weaving kits for the hobby trade. In response to burgeoning demand, they transferred to a successful knitting yarns business (*Rowan 40th Anniversary magazine*, 2018)

professional knitters, as noted in their 1988 10th Anniversary booklet, at that time Rowan supplied 250 designers, both larger well-known names and micro businesses. Broadening their market to a general public and internationally, in 1986 Rowan began to produce their own pattern booklets, commissioning many designer contributions and working with fashion editor Caroline Baker as art director, emerging photographers (including Eamonn J McCabe and Tony Boase) and models (including Kate Moss) to create a distinctive, fashionable but relaxed mood. A Sandy Black design became the first pattern in the No.1 *Rowan Knitting Book*, featuring designs by Kaffe Fassett, Sasha Kagan, Annabel Fox, Warm and Wonderful, Angela King, and others. This developed as a regular series of pattern magazines that continues to be produced today, with 72 editions to date.

To consolidate Rowan's unique position, their designer compilation book *Summer and Winter Knitting* (1987), edited by Stephen Sheard, commissioned 40 patterns from 20 designers, who were divided into those with a broadly "Classic" or "Modern" approach (Fig. 15) Sheard also distinguished fashion-oriented designers such as BodyMap, Artwork and Sarah Dallas and craft-based designers such as Susan Duckworth, Kaffe Fassett, Annabel Fox and Sasha Kagan. Machine-knit designers Christopher Fischer and Carrie White adapted their designs for hand knitting; my own designs were placed in the Moderns section. Rowan Yarns continues today, albeit no longer an independent business; the brand celebrated 40 years in 2018, marked by a book *Rowan 40 Years: 40 Iconic Designs*. Contemporary Rowan pattern magazines use both freelance and in-house designers including Kim Hargreaves, Marie Wallin and Martin Storey, who formerly worked as knitwear designer with Artwork for many years.

[insert Fig 15 Summer and Winter Knitting book with Martin Kidman designs on cover]

The designer pattern books discussed above published by mainstream publishing houses such as Century, Dorking Kindersley and Unwin Hyman, and others including Ebury Press, testify to the attractiveness and huge popularity of designer-led hand knitting from the mid 1970s and throughout the 1980s, reigniting an almost forgotten skills base for a new generation. The designers were able to take advantage of a relaxation in the rigid fashion system that began in the 1960s and continued with a more individualistic do-it-yourself ethos instigated by the early 1970s punk movement, and other youth subcultures. This context, combined with a search for authenticity, autonomy, and the reclamation and embracing of "domestic" craft practices within second wave feminism (Parker 1984, Peach 2013, Turney 2009, 10) can be seen to have helped this largely female entrepreneurship to thrive. Importantly, these knitwear designers, as indicated in the above examples, could exploit their design skills and creativity to produce innovative and appealing garments that could not at the time be readily made by mass market manufacturing processes. The growing availability of specialist natural yarns in sophisticated colour palettes consolidated this unique position, and facilitating the wider dissemination of fashionable designer patterns to a general public.

Conclusions

During this creative designer knitwear era, both outworkers knitting for income and knitters making for themselves showed a readiness to create something fresh and inspiring, utilising colour work (intarsia) techniques and stitch patterns knitted from detailed visual graph charts, that could be challenging but extremely rewarding. From the outworker knitter's point of view, despite its intricacy, colour work was embraced wholeheartedly as a means to create an unusual and distinctive fashionable product. It gave the knitter a sense of creative agency and pride in their quality of production, applying their skills for creative satisfaction as well as income; decisions regarding colour usage could often be contributed by the knitter themselves, from a palette selected by the designer, an approach favoured by Kaffe Fassett. As a knitwear designer I gave knitters making abstract geometric designs or striped scarves free rein to combine the colours as they wished, creating interesting variations and great individuality. Sample knitters would also make helpful suggestions for improvements to designs and designers would use their knitters' expertise to test patterns for errors. Although there was some media debate about exploitation of homeworkers in general (Turney 2009, 17; Halbert 2018, 186), many knitters (and their knitting styles) were known personally as a vital and valued part of the designers' business, with no intention to exploit. The social impact of these design-led knitwear businesses could also be significant for the makers who were able to earn income at home through their skills, often despite constraints such as isolation, caring responsibilities or mobility impairments. In my own case, in the early years I personally distributed knitters' work to their homes to build strong relationships and provide guidance if needed, and the knitters were proud of their contribution to the fashion zeitgeist.

Hand knitting as a leisure pursuit also enabled a sense of creative agency to be experienced by those knitters who re-created designer fashion knitwear for themselves from the published pattern instructions, as a means to participate in luxury fashion at a fraction of the retail cost, a reward for their own creative labour and skill. Turney (2009, 102) notes "To knit a designer sweater connotes personal investment in that designer or brand, as well as the ideology or 'personality' such a designer or brand affords. The ordinary (knitting) becomes extraordinary." By this means, a direct relationship was created between the designer and the customer, through the process of knitting and making, entering into a shared creative space, in contrast to the transactional experience of retail fashion. Interestingly, knitters currently recording their work on the Ravelry knitting website (with over 9 million registered users) write about their sense of achievement and pride in creating these now "vintage" designs, even when described as a "labour of love" – sometimes taking years to finish.

The heyday of the designer knitwear boom, where colour and pattern were paramount, lasted well over a decade, until mainstream fashion turned away from its relaxed silhouette and pastoral mood, the intricate statement knits and humorous pieces, to fully embrace "power dressing", with its sharply defined styles and angular shoulders – the opposite of the

softly draped or form-fitting shapes of knitwear. At the same time, body conscious sportswear (largely made from industrially knitted fabrics) was in the ascendancy. However, despite the increase in sophistication of industrial knitting capability, designer knitwear had established itself as part of the fashion landscape, and proved to have longevity, sustaining itself in a quieter way with designers including Sasha Kagan, Kaffe Fassett and Marian Foale continuing to create collections and books of designs for many years, some designers still going strong today, others having taken up lecturing posts, or started a different business. Jane and Patrick Gottelier of Artwork produced their first knitting pattern book *Indigo Knits* in 2007, followed by *Knitting and Tea* in 2009 - a long time after the initial hand knitting boom, reflecting the continued interest in hand knitting for creative satisfaction and wellbeing²⁴. Indeed, after many years primarily exploring needlepoint and quilting, Kaffe Fassett returned to knitting in *Kaffe Knits Again* in 2007, and produced a series of quilting books as well as the 2021 book *Kaffe Fassett in the Studio* presenting his approach to several creative techniques. My own recent book *Classic Knits of the 1980s* (2021) revisits Sandy Black designs of the period, and discusses the broader knitwear design context, inspiration and design process. Despite the recent move to online pattern sharing, knitting pattern books continue to be regularly published.

This article has examined a little-studied period in the history of knitting design and fashion knitwear and has provided new insights into a group of design-led businesses developed by practitioners of the craft. Their fresh, creative approach to an “old-fashioned” craft long undervalued and dismissed as merely “women’s work” created strong impact, and designer knitwear was the height of fashion for a number of years. The popularity of the designs, many of which were seen on the London catwalks and featured regularly in the press, triggered demand from those who could not afford the luxury price tags. Significantly, the willingness of the designers to provide knitting instructions for their coveted pieces enabled home knitters to make identical looks, and participate in the high fashions of the time. Unlike mainstream fashion, through novel marketing practices, many knitwear designers created a strong relationship with the public, via their books, yarn kits and special promotions, with many running practical workshops (organised, for example, by Rowan Yarns or specialist knitting yarn shops). This contrasts with the assertion by Halbert (2018, 186) that “Fashion-forward knitwear, therefore, remained the preserve of those who could afford to buy the designer version and with few exceptions, those knitting at home had to make do with the largely dowdy offerings of the commercial yarn companies”. I would argue that as discussed above, the popularity of fashionable knitwear as evidenced in the press coverage and broadcast media, then translated into specialist publications, designer books, patterns and knitting kits would amount to more than “few exceptions”, as these fashionable designs became widely accessible to the general public.

Knitting blends creative, mathematical and technical skills, which education often separates. After much development and innovation from the late 20th century, industrial knitting

²⁴ This has extended to recognition of the therapeutic value of hand knitting, see Betsan Corkill’s Stitchlinks project and self-published *Knit for Health and Wellness*. <http://www.stitchlinks.com>

technology is now highly sophisticated, with computer-aided design systems offering extended capacity for designers in industry to create complex patterns and textures not feasible in the 1970s and 80s. A key legacy of this era's designer "knitwear revolution" is the fashion stimulus given to the knitwear market demonstrating a demand that accelerated technology progress and is still evident today; a further legacy is dispelling for good the dull and dowdy image of knitting, and re-positioning knitting and knitwear within fashion and culture as a creative medium of personal expression, its potential for creativity only limited by imagination.

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Figure Captions

Images by Sandy Black unless otherwise stated

Figure 1. 1930s “Jazz” knitting pattern booklet featuring colour patterns. Photo Sandy Black

Figure 2. 1970s Knitting pattern for matching family sweaters. Photo Sandy Black

Figure 3. *The Knitwear Revolution* book, Bell and Hyman 1983, featuring Sandy Black’s Vase of Flowers coat in 100% Angora yarn. Photo Sandy Black.

Figure 4. *Knitting a Common Art* Exhibition Catalogue, 1986, featuring machine knitted ‘Hoover’ design by Vanessa Keegan. Photo Sandy Black.

Figure 5. Selection of labels provided by American stores for use in Sandy Black ready-to-wear knitwear, including “Sweaters as Art” for Saks Fifth Avenue, New York. Photo Sandy Black.

Figure 6. Sandy Black’s Lion and Unicorn Sweater from the Heraldic collection, 100% wool, 1984. Photo David McIntyre.

Figure 7. *Sandy Black Original Knitting* book, Unwin Hyman 1987, featuring modular-knitted coat in wool and angora. Photo Sandy Black.

Figure 8. Sandy Black’s Fairisle Fun mohair sweater and knitting kit, 1982. Photo © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 9. *Wild Knitting* book, Mitchell Beazley 1979. Photo Sandy Black.

Figure 10. *Patricia Roberts Second Knitting Book*, W.H. Allen 1983. Photo Sandy Black.

Figure 11. Artwork’s Trellis overprinted cotton sleeveless sweater, Spring/Summer 1985 collection. Photo © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 12. Kaffe Fassett’s Romeo and Juliet coat, wool, 1988. Photo courtesy Kaffe Fassett Studio.

Figure 13. Sasha Kagan’s Acorn Jacket, wool/mohair mix, 1989. Photo courtesy Sasha Kagan.

Figure 14. Susan Duckworth’s Butterfly Floral sweater, 10% cotton, 1985, featured in *Summer and Winter Knitting*. Photo courtesy of Rowan Yarns.

Figure 15. *Rowan’s Designer Collection: Summer and Winter Knitting* book, Century, 1987. Photo Sandy Black