



Coverlet or *åkle* handwoven with handspun and plant-dyed wool yarn. Brought from Sogn, Norway, in the 1850s by Anders Berdahl or Marthe and Jens Otterness. Vesterheim 1986.133.002 - Gift of Ella Valborg Tweet.

# Husfliden: A Herstory

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When asked to describe Norwegian culture, most people would not get very far before they said “sweater” or “knitting.” Today it seems that Norwegian culture is inseparable from its pointed mittens and geometric sweaters. This has not always been the case. When visiting a major Norwegian city, many tourists visit a Husfliden to marvel at the displays of intricately knit sweaters, endless rows of yarn and brightly colored silk neck scarves. To see this assortment of goods for sale would have shocked the Norwegian women of the early nineteenth century. For them, most handcraft was a necessary household task requiring much of their time and effort for no financial compensation. Husfliden strengthened Norwegian folk art traditions at a time when the nation was seeking to define itself and provided financial autonomy for women as they took their first steps toward financial independence.

It is not a secret that life in rural Norway was difficult before the second wave of the Industrial Revolution in the 1850s. With little infrastructure to connect rural areas to larger cities, information and resources moved slowly between the two. Though it may not have felt like a blessing at the time, this isolation ultimately kept folk art traditions alive long enough for them to be documented. Denmark’s general neglect of Norway as a remote province preserved a love of simplicity, which was wiped from much of Europe by the flow of new ideas (Nelson 1994, VII). Depending on how difficult it was to travel away from an area, some regions had to be completely self-sufficient for most of the year. Many of the handcrafts we revere today were born of necessity, from carving mangle boards to building homes (Bjørvik 1995, 121). Before these traditions were a hobby, they were all in a hard day’s work.

The fiber-based folk art traditions were matrilineal. Women were responsible for keeping their household stocked with all the textiles and garments they would

need throughout the year, producing everything from raw materials. To knit a pair of socks, a woman first had to raise a sheep. They spent long hours processing wool and spinning it into fibers that could then be knit or woven into garments and textiles for the home and its inhabitants. To color the fibers they foraged in their surrounding areas for birch, lichen, and many other sources of natural dye. They grew flax and spun linen thread, blending it with different fibers depending on the need the finished cloth would fulfill. Most homes had two spinning wheels. Industry growth demanded infrastructure, so trade expanded rapidly between rural and metropolitan areas. Non-farming populations increased in areas where inhabitants historically grew their own food, creating an immediate and urgent need for food. Farmers had to be more strategic with their land in order to meet this need. Cows, having a higher yield on their investment, became the preferred livestock and sheep were phased out. Cotton from the United States, made affordable due to enslaved labor, gradually replaced both wool and linen. Suddenly the spinning wheels stood silent (Lunden 1944, 119–21).

Before Norway achieved independence from Denmark in 1814 and became a union with Sweden, goods moved freely to larger Norwegian cities from other countries. After independence, there was an enthusiastic focus on domestic goods. Combined with the unreliable trade routes caused by the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) some commonly imported goods were halted altogether. To compensate for the lack of imported brocade and damask, rural women embraced intricate embroidery and stranded colorwork knitting. Many of these styles we would recognize today, especially in the iconic knitted sweaters of Setesdal and Fana (Sundbø 2007, 124). The practicality of these early handmade objects did not mean they could not be beautiful; rural life demanded a respect for nature, and folk practices often reflected this.



Women shearing sheep in Rauland, Telemark, 1890s. Vesterheim Archives - Herbjørn Gausta Collection.



Women carding wool and spinning yarn in Rauland, Telemark, 1890s. Vesterheim Archives - Herbjørn Gausta Collection.

Many of the motifs used in traditional Norwegian handcraft today stem from pre-Christian times, kept safe in their soft and secret language of geometry through many social changes. The symbols were used to bargain with nature and protect loved ones from its forces, to give good fortune, and to cure illness. The *marekors*, for example, was commonly carved into headboards or woven into coverlets to protect against nightmares. Hearts signaled happiness and affection for the recipient of the knitwear. These pagan symbols were largely rejected by Christian Puritans in the nineteenth century only to be resurrected during *Nasjonalromantikken* (national romanticism) as symbols of Norwegian-ness and national pride (Sundbø 2007, 50-1). Today, many of these motifs feature prominently on the mittens and sweaters for which Norway is known.

As the infrastructure of the Industrial Revolution drew new lines of contact between cities and rural areas, folk traditions that had existed unaware of Danish influence for 400 years were now vulnerable. *Nasjonalromantikken* was a creative and scholarly movement during the nineteenth century, which sought to establish a “true Norwegian identity” in the wake of independence from Denmark (Brathole 2017). This group of creatives scoured the land for folklore, language, dress, handcraft, and other fragments of Norwegian identity that had not been altered under Danish rule. These same remote, self-sufficient areas that had been sheltered from the rest of Europe had also been sheltered from metropolitan influence within their own country. Researchers returned triumphant and laden with folk tales, music, and the rich folk dress traditions that would shape Norwegian culture for generations to come. Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe collected and published their book of folk tales that is still in print today. Ivar Aasen scoured Western Norway for the dialects that would become *Nynorsk*, one of the two official written languages of Norway. With this raw material, one group of scholars and artists would craft a Norwegian national identity and strengthen a groundswell of nostalgia touching every aspect of Norwegian life.

Handcraft became political during this time of self-reflection. According to Norwegian knitwear historian Annemor Sundbø, the folk arts of Norway’s rural population, particularly women, uplifted by the scholars of *Nasjonalromantikken* were considered representative of the nation’s character and capabilities on the international stage. The optics of a rich and vibrant folk culture as part of this new identity were appealing, and women now served as diplomats of handcraft. Norway displayed these talents at the first world’s fair in London in 1851. The excursion was funded by the Royal Society for Norway’s Welfare, established in 1809. Sociologist and theologian Eilert Sundt devoted much of his life to examining poverty and the social tensions associated with the Industrial Revolution. He saw this new enthusiasm for folk culture as an opportunity for rural craftspeople to capitalize on their work through a network of distributors (Sundbø 2007, 125). By 1852, handwork became a subject of instruction in Norwegian schools (Sundbø 2007, 24). These early efforts to develop Norwegian folk art laid the groundwork for Husfliden.

Other champions of Scandinavian folk art were the newly established folk museums in Norway and Sweden. The Museum of Applied Art (*Kunstindustrimuseum i Oslo*) was founded in 1876 with the intention of rekindling public interest in handwork. In 1886, government funding began to support folk art education and a cultivation of folk artisans throughout the country. Marion Nelson, former director of Vesterheim, credits Eilert Sundt with laying the framework for the concept of the folk museum (Nelson 1994, 22). The first classes were in woodcarving, weaving, birchroot basket making, and rosemaling. Once the artisans began to produce work on a larger scale, the museums created sales organizations to facilitate private purchases. Within a decade these organizations became *Den Norske Husflidsforening*, or “the Norwegian Home Art and Craft Association” (Steen 1995, 253). The network of stores operated by this association are known simply as “Husfliden.” Just like today, shops featured regional offerings unique to each location. Each store offered handcraft classes as well as handmade goods from local makers, many of them women (Sundbø 2007, 132).

In the 1860s, the rise of the textile industry and expanding cotton import made fabric more affordable to purchase and, for the first time, rural Norwegians were wearing machine-woven cloth rather than homespun. With textile production removed from the daily chore list for many women, there was much speculation as to what they should do with their “free” time. Many of them joined the workforce, either in the new textile mills or performing seasonal labor such as drying fish. Unsurprisingly, almost everyone had something to say about how working-aged women should handle this shift in responsibilities. There was a sense among many that women no longer wanted to work and had become lazy. Eilert Sundt soundly disagreed; it was not that they did not want to work, it was simply no longer worth their time to produce their own textiles. He calculated that “if a woman wanted her household to have even enough mittens, socks, and a bit of rough wool cloth, she must in one year spin 8,978 grams of wool and weave 3,990-4,738 grams of wool. That would be 48 days of spinning, 24 days of knitting and 8 days of weaving. With all of this comes carding and pulling and dyeing the wool. And after all of this work there will still be many textiles she must buy” (Lunden 1944, 133). When faced with those numbers, it is easy to see the appeal of the affordable cotton cloth from the textile mill.

In this whirlwind of criticism and public scrutiny, what did women do with this “free” time? They started working smarter, not harder – and for themselves. Less time producing goods for the home meant more time to produce goods that could be traded. When women produced everything they needed themselves, there was no cause to ask a man for money. Now that some textiles needed to be purchased, they required currency. Seeking to avoid the resentment caused by asking men for money, some used their precious unburdened hours to produce small textiles for trade with salesmen for other household goods. Traveling salesman, or *landhandler*, was a new profession at this time when people were willing to buy things they would have



Small (2.5 inches tall) basket made of birch or spruce roots. This basket was brought from Øyfjell, Telemark, in 1867 by Liv Aslaksdatter and Amund Stenerson Fondelid. They came in 1867 to join her parents near Farmington, Minnesota. Baskets made of coiled roots were a common item at Husfliden. Vesterheim 1987.129.011 - Gift of Stella Stenerson Senstad.

made themselves before. They traveled into rural areas with goods procured from importers in the city. Some women were so successful trading their handcraft that men took on some kitchen chores to give them more time for spinning, weaving, and knitting (Lunden 1944, 135).

With the invention of the home sewing machine and eventually the home knitting machine, a cottage industry took hold and women were able to meaningfully contribute to their household income by selling these items through their local Husfliden (Sundbø 2007, 132). In my own family, a woman named Ingeborg was widowed at a young age. Living on an island off the coast, she knitted for a shop in Bergen to provide for herself and her three young children. Knitting was available to every woman, but upper class women tended to knit for charity or social enjoyment (Sundbø 143). The financial freedom Husfliden provided to working class women cannot be overstated. It is important to note that women supported themselves through the work available to them, often handwork, long before men constructed a framework to support them. A Norwegian punishment registry in 1634 lists a vagabond woman arrested for witchcraft. Her name was Lisbet Persdatter and she was described as supporting herself by knitting stockings, among other things (Sundbø 2007, 121).

What was happening with Norwegian folk art in America at this time? At the same time that women in Norway were

gaining this new financial independence through the sale of their handwork, Norwegian folk art was starting a new journey in the United States. The great migration occurred during the *Nasjonalromantikken*. Since scholars were sparse or had moved to the cultural hub of Copenhagen, the main culture bearers in Norway were rural people who had mainly expressed themselves through utilitarian objects (Nelson 1994, 5). Most of the Norwegians immigrating to the United States were rural people, so this material culture crossed the ocean with them. The first wave of immigrants were too busy to reflect on their ethnic identity, so it was the second generation of Norwegian-Americans who had the luxury of exploring their cultural heritage (Nelson 1994, 11). It was under the care of this generation, specifically Haldor Hanson, that the Luther College Museum was established in 1877 (later to become Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum).

The American preservation of Norwegian folk art traditions is as much an act of care as of desperation: clinging to an ethnic identity that has faded into myth. The Norwegians who moved here during the Great Migration hoped to rise above the social status they left behind, so in the interest of assimilation they quickly adopted the “American” aesthetic. It is the later generations who, realizing what was left behind, picked up the pieces to form a uniquely Norwegian-American identity. In Decorah, Iowa, this has manifested as everything from folk art classes at



Fana-style sweater handknit in Norway and sold through Husfliden in Bergen in 1985. The donor selected a Fana-style sweater because his great-grandfather helped establish the village of Nesttun in Fana, near Bergen in western Norway. Vesterheim 2002.035.002 - Gift of John E. Offerdahl.



Pouch sewn from pieces of cotton and silk cloth by Helena Bryhn at a young age. One of the pieces was from Helena's first printed-cotton dress. She had always worn dresses of handwoven wool fabric before this. In 1853 Helena and fiancé Anders Peterson left Stange, Telemark, for Clarinda in southwest Iowa. They married the next year. Helena used the pouch to hold the letters that she and Andrew had shared during their courtship in Norway. Vesterheim 2005.007.001 - Gift of Edna Dessery.

Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum to the *rømmegrøt latté* available down the street at Java John's. One of the longer lasting and more recognizable ways we have held onto folk art in this diaspora is through dress. In the immediate rush to assimilate, much traditional dress was packed away in favor of the fashions in their new country. There were, however, exceptions. *Søljer* (silver jewelry), knitwear, and woven bands all remained intact in some way and have survived assimilation even today in the Norwegian-American community (Colburn 1994, 148). Students today can learn all three of these handcrafts at Vesterheim's Folk Art School, and visitors just wanting a closer look can see examples from those first generations of Norwegians to set foot on this Ho-Chunk, Sauk, and Meskwaki land. Over half of the instructors currently teaching at the Folk Art School are women, many of them sustaining themselves completely through teaching and selling their traditional Scandinavian handcrafts. During class, it is not uncommon to hear them talk about their latest trip to Husfliden.

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## About the Author

Jane Addams is a first generation Norwegian American with a long family history in the woolen mills of Norway. She has 13 years of experience knitting traditional Norwegian colorwork. Raised in Illinois, she has spent years in the Pacific Northwest and currently lives in Decorah, Iowa. She vows never to live outside of the "sweater weather" zone. Jane designs Selbu mittens for yarn stores and fashion brands and enjoys studying and teaching this rich textile heritage.