

# Everyday Mittens

Laura Ricketts

It is such a wonderful, waking dream to be able to view the items in a museum's holdings. Holdings are museum pieces not on display. They can be artwork, yes, but also three-dimensional pieces of art that have survived being made, being used, and being loved – being loved so much that someone donated them to a museum – and being so worthy that the museum said, “yes.” My idea of the best holdings are textiles—specifically, knitting.

In 2013, I travelled to northern Scandinavia to visit two national museums and twelve regional museums, eleven of which gave me access to their holdings. At those thirteen museums, I studied their Sámi knitted mittens. I was able to study them and chart the motifs. Some were over a hundred years old and of high gauge, home-dyed handspun. Others, surprisingly, were made of 1970s bright acrylic. Each spoke to me of beautiful stories regarding its maker, its wearer, and the place in which it was made.

Vesterheim is a remarkable place. It is a spike of Norway in the fertile ground of America. Many of the items in its holdings were brought here by hardworking immigrants. The fact that seafarers brought these items meant they were treasured or necessary – or both. Some of the items were made by immigrants who had already come to the United States. The fact that Vesterheim has preserved them lets me know that the item showcases a skill, is a shining example, or tells a story as well.

I have chosen three sets of mittens in Vesterheim's collection to share their stories with you. All are everyday mittens belonging to individuals doing their everyday living. It was a difficult decision not to choose the bright and colorful, the embellished and embroidered. Those readily catch the eye. But these mittens would have been touched and used daily and relied upon. Their pattern was known, made frequently, and perfected by the skilled craftswomen who wanted to make a mitten just so.

## Workman's Mittens

The first are workman's mittens. These mittens were a necessary piece of equipment for the Arctic fisher. If he did not have his mittens, he ran the risk of not being able to do his job at best or losing his hand at worst. In a way, that makes these mittens the most valuable.

The unused, double-thumbed fisherman's mittens hail from the Norwegian island of Sommarøy near Tromsø. They were made in 2012 by a member of the Sommarøy Husflidslag. Yes, they are huge (18 inches long) and yes, they have two thumbs. Neither is a mistake. I have viewed such traditional fisherman's mittens in the Netherlands, Iceland, and Maine, as well. The mittens are full during the job (either dampened and then used to pull on ropes, or thrown on the bottom of the boat and walked on, for example). Fulling is the process of using friction, heat, and moisture to shrink knitted or woven wool fabric. If you have ever washed and dried a wool sweater, you have experienced the magic of fulling.

The second thumb is a boon when fishing, too. While working, when the fisherman's palm or thumb gets a bit too damp or fishy, he can pull his thumb out, rotate the mitten 180°, and stick his digit in the nice, clean, knit thumb. Not only does this allow the mitten to full evenly, but it also doubles the life of the mitten. This pair is newly made and not yet full.

The second pair of double-thumbed fisherman's mittens held by Vesterheim were full and well worn by Peder Bakkevold (1915–1993), a fisherman from Sommarøy, Norway. These mittens bear his initials, “PB” and were worn into the early 1980s. Obviously, the difference in sizing of the two pair of double-thumbed fisherman's mittens is startling. The used pair is 12 inches long. But to see and feel them in person, as I have, there is so much more to learn. These worn mittens have become very thick and almost crunchy due



Left: Old pair used by Peder Bakkevold, a fisherman from Sommarøy, Norway, into the 1980s. Twelve inches long.

Right: New pair knit by members of Sommarøy Husflidslag at Sommarøy, near Tromsø, Norway, 2012. Eighteen inches long.

Vesterheim 2012.030.001-002 - Gift of Svein Ludvigsen.

to not only the thickening from the fulling process, but also from constant exposure to salt water.

Wool is such a remarkable natural product – the outer layer of the wool fiber naturally repels water, but the inner part of the wool fiber can adsorb water vapor, which creates heat. Adsorption is when a very thin layer of molecules adheres to the outside surface of a material, rather than soaking it all the way in. At first water beads up and runs off wool and doesn't absorb. After more exposure, typical wool can adsorb 30% of its weight in water without feeling wet. After that point of saturation is achieved, wool still insulates, allowing the wearer to feel warm despite wet garments. For a traditional fisherman in the Arctic waters, there isn't a better material. Because it is thicker when it is fulled, wool is a bit more water-proof than, too. It was also harder to wear a hole in it in that state – something any good knitter approves of.

## Skolt Sámi Mittens

The next pair of mittens to examine are the Skolt Sámi mittens from Norway. This pair was made by a Sámi woman in Finnmark, Norway, and donated to the museum in 1977 for the purpose of demonstrating the special knitted braid technique at the cuff. Having studied Sámi mittens for several years, I can say there are not many pairs in American museums, even though some estimates have as many Sámi descendants in the United States as there are Sámi in the Nordic lands – about 70,000 individuals. At the time of greatest emigration in the late 1800s, Sámi suppression was at a high and many Sámi leaving their homeland chose that time to shed that part of their identity. The majority of my North American Sámi friends have discovered their Sámi ancestry as a part of genealogical research and not as a family story handed down to them. That lack of legacy may have influenced the limited number of Sámi artifacts brought to the United States and donated to museums.

I have observed an identical pair of mittens to this pair in a Skolt Sámi hand-written knitting book at the Ävv Skoltsamisk Museum in Neiden, Norway, when I met with Skolt Sámi knitter Heini Wesslin.

The Skolt Sámi are one of nine or ten subsets of the Sámi people who live across Sápmi, the traditional homeland of the Sámi peoples. In the past, they were known as the Lapps, but that name today is considered a racial slur and they prefer to be called their self-name “Sámi,” which translates as “the people.” Each subset of Sámi have their own traditional garments, language, and customs that can be as different from each other as the Danish language and traditional garments are from a rural Norwegian dialect and *folkedrakt*. The traditional Sámi knitted mittens, likewise, can reflect the traditional garment's motifs, the materials available to the people, and/or the nature that surrounds them. Although the Skolt Sámi lived in an out-of-the-way-place – their homeland is where Norway, Russia, and Finland meet – that region was, unfortunately, quite a military hotbed in the last century. Because of this, the Skolt Sámi were forced leave the area multiple times with each successive war.

The Skolt Sámi owned reindeer, of course, but also sheep. They spindle-spun their own wool. It was a common engagement present for the woman to receive a distaff that had been decoratively carved by her fiancé. The distaff was L-shaped, and she would sit on the short side of the “L” with the large part of the “L” rising next to her with the bundle of wool tied to the top. Most of the wool used in Skolt Sámi

mittens was undyed; the dyed yarn was used sparingly, and in one of the main traditional knitted mitten categories, always on the cuff. In this sub-category, the motif is created with the dyed yarn and used only in every other stitch. I have observed several pairs of Skolt Sámi mittens in Siida, the Sámi museum in Inari, Finland, in which the hand of the mitten had been cut off and reknit, all with undyed yarn, re-purposing the colorful cuff. This pair of mittens was designed to be worn, perhaps not every day (it is not a work mitten, which are usually without designs and of plain, undyed wool in “undesirable” colors). But, then again, I have seen older films of Skolt Sámi wearing decorative mittens like this while doing everyday tasks, and wearing them even in the dead of winter doubled with another pair to increase insulation.

Another aspect I love about Skolt Sámi mittens is that their motifs have retained their names, which is not the case with the other Sámi mittens I have studied. This is perhaps due to the Skolt Sámi's remote location. Birch Leaves, Forest Ponds, Ptarmigan's Foot, Fisher's Net, Seven-Eyed Bend – these are just some of the Skolt Sámi knitted motifs. The name of the pair Vesterheim owns is “Boat's Bow.” Can you see it in the pattern – the boats' prows facing out into the river, or perhaps into the Barents Sea? The Skolt Sámi are in their boats, going out to fish salmon in the river, or perhaps cod in the sea. Both were a source of livelihood for the Skolt Sámi and continue to be important. The laws vary among the four countries in which the Sámi live, but in Norway, the Sámi have indigenous rights to fish, which are still being argued about and worked out.

## Child Mittens

The last pair of mittens to examine is a child's pair. Also brought from Norway about 1900, this one was a gift from Ole Paulson, most likely to Mathea, the youngest daughter of his cousin Engeborg “Emma” Jacobsen. Mathea was the mother of the donor. The Jacobsens lived in Lyon County, Iowa, and Emma's parents came from Selbu (Trøndelag County). The yarn is so fine that it is probably handspun, two-ply with the gauge correspondingly fine. It measures 17 stitches and 19 rows per inch across the hand! These mittens only measure 4 ¼ inches by 2 ½ inches in total. The thumb is less than half an inch wide and approximately an inch long. These tight dimensions must mean that the knitted thumb is purely decorative, as no living toddler's thumb would fit in such a little knitted tube. Anyone who has tried to force a toddler's hand in a mitten can attest to that!

There are similarly shaped children's mittens from Selbu in the book *Håndplagg: til bundader og folkedrakter* by Heidi Fossnes and the recently published book *Selbuotter* by Anne Bårdsgård. The *selburose* decorating the cuff has been a common motif from this area since the mid-1800s when Marit Guldseth put this region on the map by creating the Selbu motif style of knitting. While many associate the black and white motifs with Selbu, other colors were used in their two-color knitting, such as the red and white of this mitten. The most common motif of Selbu knitting, the eight-pointed *selburose*, did not begin its knitted journey here. In fact, the same motif is knitted on the oldest known European knitted item – a grave pillow found in Burgos, Spain. How has it had such a hold on the knitted world? Could it signify light in a dark country, a flower in the middle of winter, or perhaps be a protective or spiritual sign? Tilted diamonds are a common knitted motif as well, and the gored thumb increase



Made in 1977 by a Sámi woman in Norway to demonstrate a special knitting technique. Acquired by Aagot Noss and Gunvor Schönning, curators at Norsk Folkemuseum in Oslo.  
Vesterheim 1983.011.001 - Gift of Marion and Lila Nelson.



Brought from Norway in about 1900 when Ole Paulson came to visit relatives, the Jacobsens, in Lyon County, Iowa.  
Vesterheim 1987.058.008 - Gift of Bette R. Spriestersbach.

is a standard for Norwegian mittens. All these elements together with the high gauge knitting and handspun yarn mean the maker was skilled, caring for the young. She created these dense mittens to last a long time, perhaps for multiple children to wear. A mitten like this provides warmth and beauty. And, look! It has lasted over 100 years.

In total these three pairs of mittens in Vesterheim's holdings would have been actually used and worn – one by a worker, one by a non-manual working adult, and one by a child. Each are knitted almost entirely out of natural wool, yet they are so different. The differences in sizes, the lengths (18 to 4 1/2 inches long), the gauges (from 6 to 17 stitches per inch), and the way the thumbs were made all – for a reason.

Too often, we overlook items like our work clothes, our everyday tools, our eating utensils. What if these items were handmade? What if we purposed them to be things of beauty? Would this change the way we went about our daily living? Would our enjoyment and satisfaction increase in our daily chores? I challenge you to think about these historical handmade items, make use of the resources you have around you, and gradually introduce the handmade into your life when you have the good fortune to do so.

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Laura Ricketts lives and works in northern Indiana. A former history teacher, today she knits, crochets, spins and weaves, incorporating history into her articles, patterns, and classes. You may see more of her work and upcoming classes at [www.LauraRickettsDesigns.com](http://www.LauraRickettsDesigns.com).