

Knitting style – the grace of noble ladies or the speed of peasant girls?

Anu Pink

Knitting is a textile technique with a global spread, yet the method of holding the yarn and needles differs between geographic areas and cultures. There are three main knitting styles: holding the yarn in the right hand or throwing, holding the yarn in the left hand or picking and knitting with the yarn in front of the work and manipulating it with the thumb. Knitting methods have been subject to change over time. People have tried to make the movements either faster or, as is the case with 19th century England, more graceful. Estonian knitters stayed true to throwing for centuries and were not waived by German, Russian or Scandinavian knitters. However, picking has become prevalent within the last century following the Finnish example and published materials. Studying the Estonians' knitting style and comparing this to neighbouring countries provides an insight into the development of and influences on Estonian knitting.

Keywords: knitting, knitting history, knitting styles, picking, throwing, Continental knitting, English knitting, Portuguese knitting, Estonian knitting

Introduction

The product of any working task is often considered the most valuable part, and not much value is attributed to the techniques used in production. For the worker, of course, working methods matter, especially while still learning or when trying to increase productivity. There has been very little research on the knitting styles used in Estonia one hundred years ago and how different knitting styles may have gained a foothold.

In this article, knitting style means both the knitting position (i.e. holding the yarn and needles) and how the two basic stitches – the knit stitch and the purl stitch – are made. Three different knitting positions are known in the world: throwing (holding the yarn in the right hand), picking (holding the

yarn in the left hand) and tensioning the yarn around the neck (Portuguese knitting). Sometimes, however, the development and distribution of working methods is neither governed by the best outcome nor by swifter movements. For example, holding the needles as if they were pencils surged in popularity in Victorian-era England. This ineffective working position has been said to have only served the purpose of providing the gentry with an opportunity to show off their hands and rings with graceful movements.

This article provides an overview of knitting styles in Europe and places Estonian knitting in this context. The question is whether different knitting styles in different parts of the world are connected to the spread of knitting. Does studying the distribution of knitting styles provide insight into the spread of knitting methods or even about the history of knitting in general?

Earlier research

Knitting is a popular craft, and great quantities of knitting books and handbooks aimed at the hobby knitter have been published, yet very little academic research has been aimed at it. Most of the previous scholarly works on Estonian knitting (Manninen 1927; Konsin 1972; Kaarma, Voolma 1981) are primarily focused on visual aspects of the items and have paid no attention to vital subtleties in the knitting techniques. Some of the later research (Summatavet 2010; Tomberg 2007) assigns equal importance to the design of the items, as well as to the social aspects of the heritage and the signifying value of the items, yet even these works do not go into the technical aspects in any depth.

Many knitting researchers rely on two in-depth books that have been published on the subject. The Polish textile historian Irena Turnau (1991) and the British “knitting bishop” Richard Rutt (1987) have both written about knitting history in the context of knitting styles and have provided an overview of different methods. The small number of knitted items that survive from the Middle Ages or earlier periods makes conclusions about early knitting history or the spread of knitting scarce and often contradictory.

Evidence on the early history of Estonian knitting is scarce. The small colourwork mitten fragment knitted using three different colours that was found in a mound in Jõuga from the 13th or 14th century is considered the oldest knitted find in Northern Europe (Peets 1994; Piiri 2008; Nargi 2011). The knitted fragment is part of the Tallinn University Institute of History collection (AI 4008:XXII-156). It was studied in 2005 by Anneke Lyffland, who has Estonian heritage, and she specifically focused on the technique used to knit it.

Knitting styles and their distribution around the world have usually been covered quite generally in knitting books. Continental and English knitting are often mentioned, although their actual geographical spread is not specified (Starmore 1988: 92–93; Sharon 2009: 36–37). Estonian knitting books pay no attention whatsoever to knitting styles.

Methods and materials

What are the available methods for researching knitting styles? Doubtless, a quick overview can be gained by observing the working movements of a knitter. In today's digital world, a great many videos have been uploaded to YouTube which teach people how to knit, and thereby it is quite easy to follow knitters around the world. Many people today teach themselves to knit with the help of knitting books, which also provide good insight into the recommended styles. A historical overview is not so easily compiled. Old paintings provide information; starting from the 19th century, knitting manuals are a good source, old photographs show knitting from the second half of the 19th century onward, and later, films enter the list. Unfortunately, the finished items themselves provide no evidence because the knitted cloth is usually identical irrespective of the knitting style. This, in turn, means that it is impossible to make any judgements about the knitting styles and their geographical distribution in earlier times.

Below, I will provide an overview of knitting styles around the world on the basis of old paintings and photos, and I will summarise the recommendations about knitting styles in Estonian knitting manuals and early 20th-century magazines.

Knitting styles around the world

Hand knitters around the world mainly use three different knitting positions. The first is usually referred to as *English knitting*, *American knitting*, *right-hand knitting* or *throwing*, and the working yarn is held in the right hand.

The second main knitting style is holding the working yarn in the left hand, draped over the left index finger, and the yarn is drawn through the stitch using the right needle. This style is commonly called *continental knitting*, *left-hand knitting*, *European knitting*, *German knitting* or *picking*. A similar style is used in Estonia, although the yarn is tensioned somewhat differently.

In addition to these two main styles, there is a third technique which is used in Portugal, Bulgaria, some parts of Greece, rural parts of Egypt, by indigenous people in Peru and on the island of Taquile. The yarn is manipulated using the

left thumb, and it sits in front of the work for both knitting and purling. The famously vibrant Peruvian hats are knitted inside out in the round using purl stitches. (Nargi 2011: 242–251; Stanley 2001: 28.)

Studying the geographical distribution of the two main knitting styles (English and continental knitting) quickly reveals that their execution actually differs slightly between regions. This stands true even for today, when many knitters use international knitting literature and tutorials on the Internet. The basic movements are learned at the very start, and it is difficult to change ingrained movements later.

The dichotomy of English and continental knitting is actually quite imprecise because throwing is widespread in other countries, in addition to Great Britain and North America (Stanley 2001: 25; Rutt 1987: 17). This usage is obviously Britain-centric, although it is used in other languages too.

Many authors seem to associate the style of knitting in which the right needle is held like a pencil with knitters of Southern England and call this the English style (Sharon 2009: 36–37; Stanley 2001: 23–27; Rutt 1987: 17–21). This way of holding the needles is quite uncomfortable in practice, although it is shown in knitting manuals and magazines published in 19th-century England. Richard Rutt points out that this knitting style became popular at the beginning of or just before the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901), when knitting was a honoured pastime in high-class

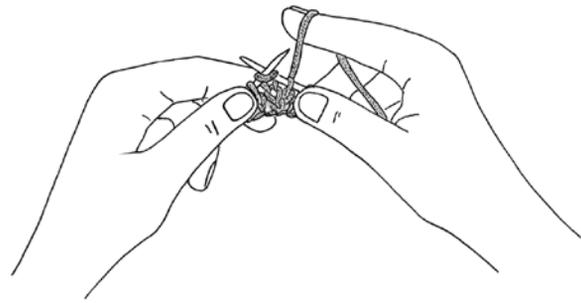


Figure 1. Throwing. *Drawing by Anu Pink.*

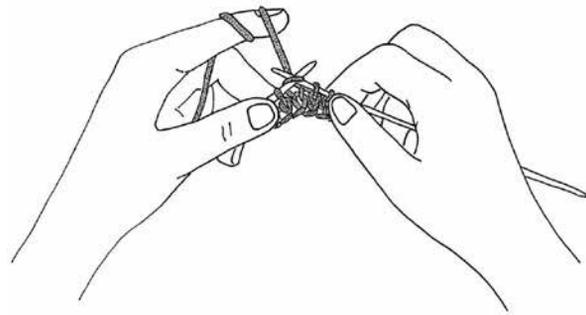


Figure 2. Internationally known continental style of knitting or picking. *Drawing by Anu Pink.*

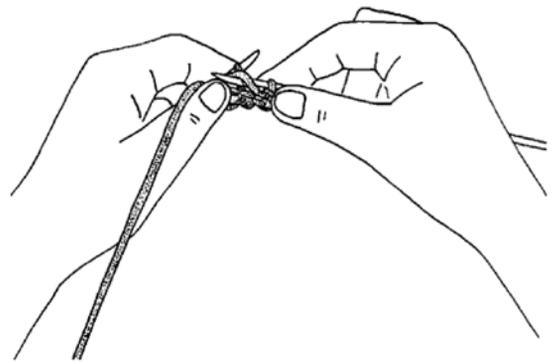


Figure 3. Portuguese knitting, where the yarn is fastened to the knitter and is manipulated with the left thumb. *Drawing by Anu Pink.*



Photo 1. Continental knitting in *Strickendes Mädchen* by Alber Samuel Anker (private collection, 1888). Digital copy from commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/¹

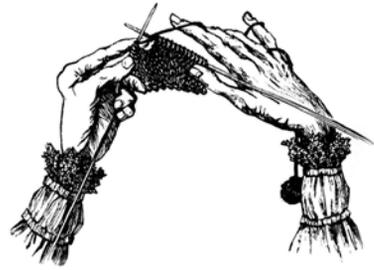


Figure 4. The graceful knitting position which gained a foothold in 19th-century England. Drawing from *The Young Ladies' Journal*, 1884.

salons. These knitters tried to distance themselves from working-class knitters, and the graceful movements were appreciated over the finished product. For instance, on 20 June 1888, *The Hosiery Review* published a column in which the author insists that knitting at concerts is a ‘new freak’ which only serves to demonstrate the beauty of the knitter’s rings and her taste in choosing them. Unfortunately, working-class knitters started to copy the ineffective knitting style of the upper class, and hence many knitters in Great Britain today use this knitting style (Rutt 1987: 17–21). According to the

British researcher Montse Stanley, who had Spanish heritage, this style of knitting is also used in Catalonia (Stanley 2001: 26).

In the northern part of Great Britain and especially on the Shetland Islands, where knitting was an important cottage industry, as well as in several other countries in Europe, a wooden, metal or bone tool that was fastened to the belt – a knitting sheath or stick – was used. The right needle was inserted into the holder, which allowed the knitter more freedom in manipulating the yarn. Knitting sheaths have been found in several

1 There are several interesting boards on Pinterest that gather paintings of knitters, such as www.pinterest.com/wade52/knitting-paintings/ and www.pinterest.com/lomelindi/knitting-paintings.

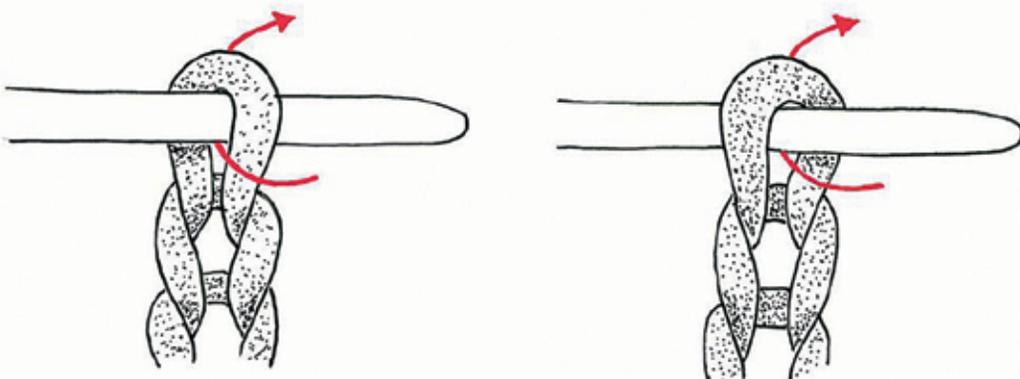


Figure 5. Forming the knit stitch by the common method (left) and in Eastern knitting (right). Drawing by Anu Pink.

European knitting centres and coastal areas – Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, and Dalmatia. Often, the sheaths have found their way to museums thanks to their rich ornamentation, whereas their original purpose was only detected later. Turnau (1991: 102) claims that there is no evidence of sheaths being used in Eastern Europe. No sheaths have been found in Estonia so far.

The knitting style that is referred to as continental knitting in contemporary literature is historically associated primarily with German knitters (Dillmont 1886: 117; Rutt 1987: 17–20; Turnau 1991: 101; Stanley 2001: 27–28; Sharon 2009: 36–37; Das Grosse Strickbuch 1995: 8).

Richard Rutt refers to the yearbook of the West Norway Museum of Decorative Art (*Vestlandske Kunstindustrimuseum. Årbok*), published in 1954, in which it is said that the Norwegian upper class was introduced to the continental knitting style in the 19th century, and from there it spread to the working class. In addition to Germany, this style of knitting has also been used in Russia (Rutt 1987). A very good overview of the knitting positions of German and Swiss knitters can be obtained from 19th-century paintings by Albert Samuel Anker (1831–1910). This Swiss painter produced a considerable number of paintings of women and children knitting. All of these paintings show that the yarn is not simply taken over the index finger, but the finger is stretched, and the yarn is looped around the finger to tension it. This is also the knitting position that is shown in all knitting books describing German knitting (Das Grosse Strickbuch 1995: 8; Sharon 2009; Crompton 2008: 16–19; Stanley 2001).

Several sources point out that, in Russia, continental knitting differed somewhat from the German style. These knitters have used so-called Eastern



Photo 2. The knitter carries the yarn in her right hand. *An old lady knits a stocking* by Eduard Allas in 1895 in Valjala, Saaremaa island, Estonia. *ERM Fk 187:24.*

knitting, in which the knit stitch is made by inserting the needle into the stitch from the East, i.e. right to left (knitting with twisted stitches). Inserting the needle from the right also allows the knitter to simply draw the yarn through the stitch without looping the yarn around the needle when purling. Many knitting books in Russian call this the granny or *babushka* method (Peškova 1972: 19–20; Stanley 2001: 29).

Many Estonian knitters also use this method, as they find it easier than the more common method. From my personal experience, I can say that these people have learned to knit on their own, and they run into problems when trying to knit more complex patterns because the stitches are sitting on the needles the opposite way from the default position. This, for example, makes it difficult to knit cables and travelling stitches. Estonian knitting teachers usually discourage this kind of knitting, although it results in stocking stitch fabric which is identical to that which one produces in the common manner. From the middle of the 20th century, continental knitting has been advocated in both Great Britain and the United States as the more efficient knitting style, yet most knitters still knit in their usual way.

Knitting styles used in Estonia

None of the international overviews have pointed out the knitting style used in Estonia, either in a contemporary or historical context, and regrettably, neither have Estonians themselves.

For several centuries, all girls – and often boys too – have been taught to knit when they were five or six years old (Konsin 1969, 1972; Tomberg 2007). Even today, some children can knit before they are introduced to knitting in school. This means that knitting style is still an inherited skill that is passed on from mother to daughter or grandmother to grandchild, and it has had very little influence from formal education or textbooks. My 25 years of experience as a teacher have taught me that it is quite difficult and often also pointless to relearn accustomed knitting movements. This means that there are throwers among very young knitters today as well.

Based on observing old photographs depicting knitters, film clips (Eesti Kultuurfilm 1937) and older knitters' knitting movements, it can be claimed that, historically, Estonians have been holding the yarn in the right hand with both needles in the palm of the hand (not held as a pencil like in England). Most older people hold the yarn and needles this way.

The first knitting book in Estonian was published in 1891 – *Naesterahwa käsitööde raamat. Esimene leht: Kunstkudumine varrastega* (A Book of Women's Handicraft. First Volume: Fine Knitting) by Natalie Johanson-Pärna – and only describes carrying the yarn in the right hand (Johanson-Pärna

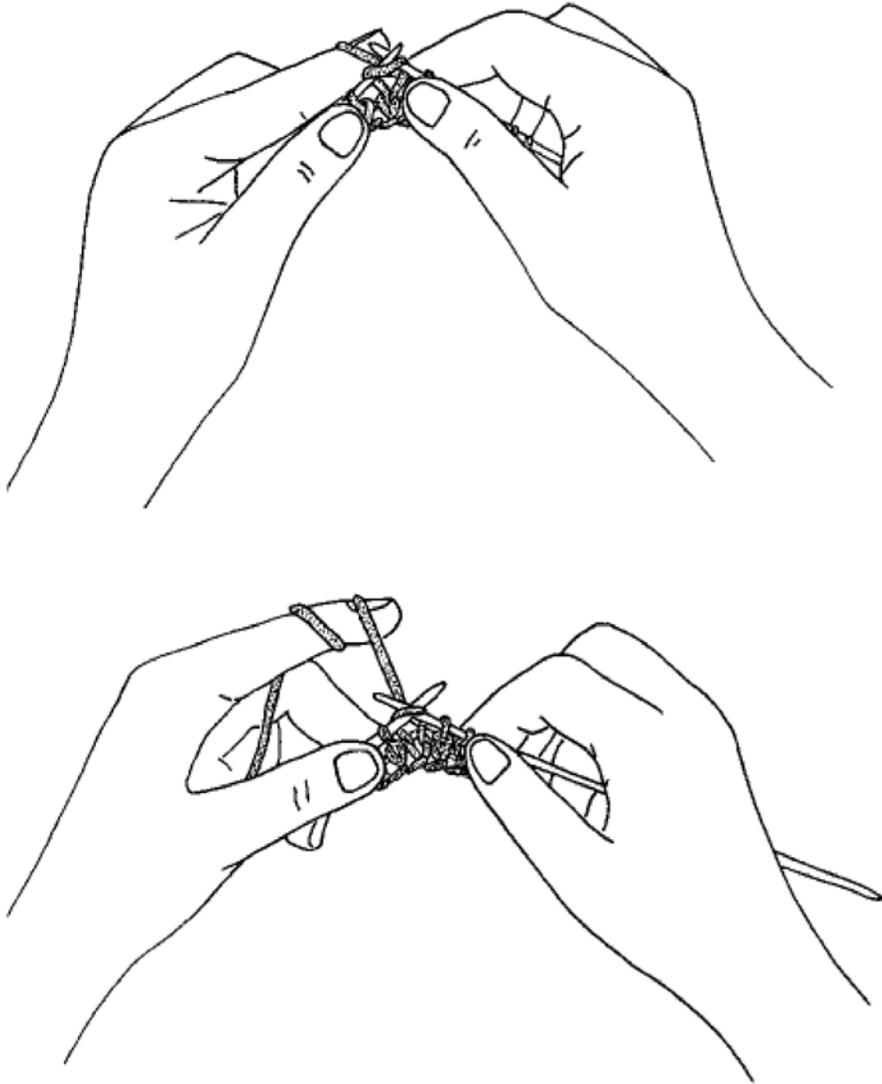


Figure 6. Picking in Estonia is shown on the first drawing. The second drawing shows picking as it is done in Central Europe. *Drawing by Anu Pink.*

1891). However, most contemporary knitters in Estonia carry the yarn in their left hand. It would be logical to surmise that some girls who worked in manors had slowly adopted the German way of knitting, and, thereby, it reached the general population. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the way most Estonian knitters hold their yarn and needles is not identical to the continental or German knitting described in

international knitting literature. Estonian knitters position their index finger mostly against the left needle; German-style knitters extend their index finger, and the yarn is looped around it.

Thus arises the question: which examples did Estonians follow, or why did Estonians adopt a new style of knitting in the 20th century? The history of early 20th-century arts and crafts in Estonia² reveals that this is the time when home economics schools opened. *Käsitööleht* (*Craft Journal*) began in 1906, in the same period when Kristjan Raud and Oskar Kallas led the anti-quarian movement and the Estonian National Museum was founded (Pedak 2007: 15–23). Studying the *Käsitööleht* issues published between 1906 and 1910 reveals that Estonian craft development relied heavily on the Finnish example. Several issues praise the development of crafts in Finland (Kallas 1907). *Käsitööleht* did not publish any tutorials on basic knitting movements between 1906 and 1926. Knitting was probably something that was so common and habitual for Estonians that nobody deemed it necessary to teach it in a magazine. Thus, we have no knowledge about which advice beginners were given at that time. However, presumably the home economics schools did not accept any girls who did not have prior knitting experience, and, therefore, everyone was most likely a thrower.

The first time picking makes an entrance in an Estonian publication is in 1924, when Elna Häkkinen published *Naiskäsitööd. Alg-, Keskkoolide ja Seminaaride õpperaamat* (*Women's Handicraft. A textbook for Primary and High Schools and Seminars*; Häkkinen 1924). A photograph in the book shows holding the yarn and needles in a way that is identical to the knitting style common in Estonia today. Alternative knitting styles are not taught in this book. Considering that Elna Häkkinen herself taught at a home economics school and was Finnish, and that many home economics teachers had studied in Finland for a longer or shorter period, it can be surmised that this style of knitting found its way to Estonia from Finland. Finnish textbooks also show this way of holding the yarn and needles (Haavisto 1961: 68).

The Finnish researcher Ritva Koskennurmi-Sivonen points out that both throwing and picking were used in Finland (and Sweden) in the 19th century, although when crafts became a part of the school curriculum in 1866 in Finland, only picking was taught. Some people who knitted with the yarn in the right hand were still alive in the 1950s (Koskennurmi-Sivonen 2009). Hence, it seems that throwing was quite the exception already in the 20th century.

2 For an English-language overview on the development of Estonian crafts in this period, see Viires, Ants 1986. Discovering Estonian folk art at the beginning of the 20th century. – *Journal of Baltic Studies* 17 (2), 79–97. – Editor's note.

Estonian authors have included both styles of knitting in their instruction manuals throughout the 20th century despite the introduction of the new style. Both knitting and throwing are shown in Claire Hallik's 1957 book *Silmuskudumine (Knitting)*, as well as in Erna Aljasmets' 1971 textbook *Silmuskudumine (Knitting)*; the last reprint was published in 1993 (Hallik 1957; Aljasmets 1971). Later publications only teach picking (Kivilo 1991; Meeri 1994; Hein *et al* 1997; Pink 2002). The following analysis of textbooks and handbooks reveals that, for over 50 years, two knitting styles were presented side by side, equally.

Knitting textbook or handbook	Year of publication	Throwing	Picking
Natalie Johanson-Pärna <i>Naesterahwa käsitööde raamat. Esimene leht: Kunstkudumine varrastega (A Book of Women's Handicraft. First Volume: Fine Knitting)</i>	1891	+	
Elna Häkkinen <i>Naiskäsitööd. Alg-, Keskkoolide ja Seminaaride õpperaamat (Women's Handicraft. A textbook for Primary and High Schools and Seminars)</i>	1924		+
Claire Hallik <i>Silmuskudumine (Knitting)</i>	1957	+	+
Erna Aljasmets <i>Silmuskudumine (Knitting)</i>	1971	+	+
Erna Aljasmets <i>Heegeldamine ja silmuskudumine (Crochet and Knitting)</i>	1980	+	+
Liivia Kivilo <i>Silmuskudumine (Knitting)</i>	1991		+
Maimu Põldoja <i>Kudumine (Knitting)</i>	1992		+
Erna Aljasmets <i>Heegeldamine ja silmuskudumine: töõpetus IV-VII klassile (Crochet and knitting: crafts for forms 4-7; reprint)</i>	1993	+	+
Tiina Meeri <i>Kudumisõpetus 1. Soonikkoed. Palmikkoed. (Knitting 1. Ribs. Cables.)</i>	1994		+
Anne Hein, Liivia Kivilo, Annika Linnas, Kai Malmstein <i>Käsitöö. Õpik 5.-6. klassile (Crafts. Textbook for forms 5 and 6.)</i>	1997		+
Anu Pink <i>Kudumine. IV-IX klass (Knitting. Forms 4-9)</i>	2002		+

Table 1. Knitting styles represented in knitting handbooks and textbooks published originally in Estonian.

Picking was introduced to Estonia one hundred years ago as a new knitting style and has become prevalent, although it has not completely taken over. Given the very long time it takes to adopt a new style, it can be supposed that throwing had been a traditional knitting style for several hundred years. This holds especially true because people only learned to knit at home, and the written word could not influence basic training. Solid proof about knitting styles and their historical development only exists for about the last few hundred years. Hence, it is only possible to make educated guesses about the earlier history of knitting. On the other hand, the history and development of knitting styles in the 19th and 20th centuries is trackable, and this information also offers unexpected discoveries.

The regional differences in knitting styles and mutual international influences are possibly the wider context for the distribution of knitting styles. These can be used as background knowledge when studying other knitting techniques. What could be the deeper reasons for the distribution of different knitting techniques, and how have cultural connections, conquests, trade routes, and other social or religious factors influenced the spread of technology? This requires a study of its own.

Conclusion

The distribution of knitting styles has in part been geographical – for example, continental knitting or picking was prevalent in Germany and in nearby areas, carrying the yarn in front of the work was common in several areas, and possibly the most widespread style was throwing or English knitting. The development of knitting techniques towards greater efficiency occurred where knitting was a means of making a living (the use of knitting sheaths on the Shetland Islands), whereas in British high society, the new knitting style was supposedly motivated by the gracefulness of the movements. Knitting in Estonia can be considered a truly inherited skill which was acquired at home. By studying their way of holding the yarn and needles, it can be said that Estonians have not taken after German, Russian, Finnish or Swedish knitters. Throwing, which had developed over hundreds of years, was used. Since the 1920s, the traditional knitting style started to slowly be replaced by picking, which has found its way to us from Finland and which slightly differs from the German way of continental knitting. Only picking has been taught in Estonian schools starting from the last quarter of the 19th century, and this is the prevalent knitting style among Estonian knitters today. Further and even more in-depth research and mapping of knitting styles will offer continuous pleasure.

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Archival materials

ERM Fk 187:24. An old lady knits a stocking. Valjala, Saaremaa island, Estonia. Photo by by Eduard Allas, 1895.

Estonian Culture Film, 1937. *Nobedate näppude linn*. Chronicle film no 40. Film Archives of the Estonian National Archives, item no 143.

Abbreviations

ERM Fk – Photo collection of the Estonian National Museum.



Photo by Andra Einmaa.