

V&A Academy

KNITTING OF THE BRITISH ISLES:

HANDS ON HISTORY



Introduction

While the origins of knitting are unclear, we know it has been practised in many different parts of the world, over many centuries, producing both objects of great beauty as well as practical items. This five-week course will focus on the history of hand-knitting in the British Isles, where we'll explore topics ranging from debunking myths about Shetland lace to unravelling the histories of hand-knitting in the Indian subcontinent.

Each week we'll delve into a different history and technique to gain a deeper understanding of the craft through combined lecture-based learning and practical making. Lecturers include specialist writers and historians including Claire Wilcox, Roselyn Chapman and Pragya Sharma. Hands-on sessions will be led by textile artist and teacher Rachael Matthews, where you'll get the chance to try out the techniques for yourself, creating a series of beautiful swatches before experimenting with your own creations.

Information

Mondays, 12 January 2026 – 9 February 2026, 11.00-16.00.

Each day will include a break between 12.30-13.30.

This course will be held at V&A East Storehouse.

Note: V&A Academy programmes are subject to change without notice.

Week 1 – 12th January

Identity

- 11.00 Introduction: History and Evolution of UK Hand Knitting in the 20th Century **Sandy Black**

The talk will focus on the changing perceptions and practices of hand knitting across the 20th century, contextualised with some historic pieces in the collections of the V&A. We will cover hand knitting in relation to the domestic sphere and to industry, and its position in relation to fashion throughout the century.

- 13.30 Workshop: Multi coloured patterns/patches **Rachael Matthews**

Getting to know each other through stripes. A rainbow of DK yarns beckon you to match and clash colours as you find your flow and chat to new friends.

Week 2 – 19th January

Cultural Narratives/Colour: Indian Knitting

- 11.00 Unravelling Histories of Hand-knitting from the Indian subcontinent **Pragya Sharma**

This lecture will trace the introduction and development of hand knitting in colonial India, inspiration and influences, as well as the technique's evolution as an everyday craft practice among Indians, well into the present day.

- 13.30 Workshop: Indian Knitting **Rachael Matthews**

Knitting is a special non-verbal language which enables us to travel through time, and around the world, engaging with the work of other knitters. The good news is we don't have to leave the V&A to do this! Taking inspiration from the multi-cultural provenance of Indian hand knitting, we will create colour work with the vibrant motifs of Paisley and Tree of Life which will dance off your needles in Shetland Spindrift yarns.

Week 3 – 26th January

Structure/Texture: Aran Knitting

11.00 The evolution of Aran Style **Barbara Smith**

Aran sweaters became gradually familiar to knitters in Britain from the 1940s on when published patterns began to appear, though many early examples are very different from the Aran sweaters knitted in Ireland. This talk will demonstrate how Aran knitting evolved in Britain, illustrated with examples from the Knitting & Crochet Guild collection.

13.30 Workshop: Aran Knitting **Rachael Matthews**

With bigger needles and heavier wool, we will twist our stitches in robust vertical repeats. The hardest part of Aran Style knitting is choosing a design from its rich history. Rolling waves, climbing rope ladders, and Celtic knots will inspire you to go out and knit in all weathers.

Week 4 – 2nd February

Cultural Narratives/Business: Shetland Lace

11.00 Cultural Sensitivities: Debunking the myths of Shetland lace **Roslyn Chapman**

Shetland lace is one of the most recognisable knitted textiles in the United Kingdom. People think they know what it looks like, how it was produced and the conditions of the knitters in the islands. But do they really? After illustrating Shetland lace in all its forms, this talk will highlight some of the inaccuracies in what is often presumed to be the history of Shetland lace knitting.

13.30 Workshop: Shetland Lace **Rachael Matthews**

Learning to knit Shetland lace with Shetland wool is a sublime experience. This lightweight fabric full of rhythmic holes is warm, delicate, and substantial. Crisp to knit the yarn then softens considerably when washed. The holes we made as beginner knitters will become the proud techniques of the professional lace knitter.

Week 5 – 9th February

Form: Ribs and Ruffles

11.00 Rebel Knitting – Vivienne Westwood **Claire Wilcox**

Vivienne Westwood took much of her inspiration from the V&A collections. Loved as a true innovator and rebel, she claimed that no ideas were new, but deeply rooted in history and culture. Here we will look at some of Vivienne's work housed by the V&A, and discuss where her ideas had come from.

13.30 Workshop: Ribs and Ruffles **Rachael Matthews**

Energetic ruffles, wearable holes, travelling stitches and weird changes in tension are rarely seen on popular knitting patterns because they are hard to verbally instruct. A wild introduction to these experimental techniques will add to the DIY ethos of your knitting practice. Vivienne would say that there are no boundaries when it comes to knitting.

Course Contributors

Rachael Matthews has taught hand knitting for over twenty years, working with community groups to develop knitting as socially engaged art. Teaching Knit at Central St Martins College of Art and Design has taught her to communicate through stitches with all cultures on a deeply creative level. Her book 'The Mindfulness in Knitting' has been recently re-published.

Prof. Sandy Black is Professor of Fashion & Textile Design & Technology in the Centre for Sustainable Fashion at London College of Fashion, UAL. Before entering higher education, she ran her Sandy Black Original Knits business, selling knitwear and knitting kits to prestigious stores worldwide. She is author of several books including Classic Knits of the 1980s (2021) Knitting: Fashion, Industry, Craft (2012) and Knitwear in Fashion (2002).

Pragya Sharma is an AHRC Technē-funded PhD researcher in the History of Design (2023-27) at the University of Brighton (UK). She is working on tracing the provenance of hand-knitting in the Indian subcontinent while teasing out the finer concepts of domesticity, gender and labour within the craft practice. She was previously engaged as a design academic in India for over six years while pursuing various research projects that entailed fieldwork, working with textile artisans and ethnographic writing and documentation.

Barbara Smith retired from an academic career in computer science in 2009 and took up knitting again after a gap of 25 years. She joined the Knitting & Crochet Guild and became a volunteer working on the Guild collection, where she is Publications Curator. Since 2010, she has written a blog barbaraknitsagain.blogspot which documents her growing fascination with knitting and knitting history.

Dr Roslyn Chapman completed her PhD thesis on the History of the Shetland lace knitting industry in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Although she has researched knitted textiles in other regions, her focus regularly returns to Shetland. She collaborated with Dr Carol Christiansen, textile curator at Shetland Museum and Archives on the RSE funded Nottingham Shetland lace project and was a research associate on the AHRC funded project Fleece to Fashion: Economies and Cultures of Knitting in Modern Scotland at the University of Glasgow.

Claire Wilcox is Professor in Fashion Curation and former Senior Curator of Fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum. She has curated many exhibitions at the V&A including Vivienne Westwood (2004). She was co-curator of Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up (2018) and Fashioning Masculinities: the Art of Menswear (2022). She is currently Visiting Scholar at the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing, Wolfson College, Oxford.