Color patterned pouch

by Chris Laning

NEEDLES

16-inch circular needle, size 5 or 6
(Optional: a set of double-pointed needles in the same size)

YARN

This bag is worked in wool worsted-weight yarn — the size most commonly used for sweaters. It takes about 40 yards of the color you use the most, and 10 to 20 yards each of three or more other colors.

Recommended yarns: Bartlett Yarns Fisherman 2-ply, Philosopher's Wool 2-ply worsted, or another 2-ply 100% wool worsted-weight yarn would be the closest approximation to historical yarn from before 1600. To be most historically accurate you want solid colors, with no light-to-dark or multi-color shading or heathering (these are later developments).

If you use white or cream-colored yarn, it can either be wool, or worsted-weight cotton yarn such as "Sugar'n'Cream". The earliest knitted pieces often use cotton for their white.

BEGINNING AT THE TOP

Cast on 72 stitches (for Color chart #1) or 70 stitches (for Color chart #2) with your main color. Join stitches into a round, being careful not to twist the row of stitches when you join it.

Knit plain (knit every stitch — no need to purl). Work about 1/2 to 1 inch before you start the color patterning and the same after you have finished the color-patterned band. 1 square in the color chart equals one stitch.

Color chart #1: start with 72 stitches

After an inch or two, you may want to try putting your stitches onto 3 or 4 double-pointed needles, with one needle left free to work the stitches on each needle in turn. This was the method used for knitting in the round before circular needles were invented in the early 20th century.

The key to good color-stranded knitting is tension. The yarn colors that aren't being used at the moment are carried on the wrong side of the knitting. If these "floats" are too tight, the knitting will pucker and warp. A good rule of thumb is this: before you take the first stitch of a color that has not been used recently, spread the stitches on your right needle as far apart as they will go. Take your new stitch and pull it just barely snug — not tight. When you release the pull on this yarn, the float will be just loose enough.

If, by chance, you get a float too loose, it's easy to pull on it to adjust the stitches on the front so they don't gap. With washing, the floats will stick to the inside of the bag and not be troublesome.

Don't tie knots when you change colors; instead, just start knitting with the new yarn. The stitches will be loose at first, but you can go back and tighten them when you have knitted half a round or so. If you will use a color again within two or three rounds, leave it hanging on the inside of the bag; otherwise, leave about six to eight inches hanging and cut the yarn.

When you have worked the color patterning and another 1/2 to 1 inch in your main color, bind off.

FINISHING

Flatten the cylinder of knitting and overcast (sew) the two bound-off edges together at the bottom with a large needle and a strand of the same yarn (going once through each front & back stitch).

Alternatively, instead of a normal bind-off, do a 3-needle bind-off to close the bottom of the bag (a common finish for closed ends before 1600).

Where you changed colors, pull the beginning and ending of the colored yarn carefully so the stitches on the outside are the same size as all the other stitches. Take the loose end of yarn and, on the inside of the bag, weave it in and out a few times among other stitches of the same color and trim off the end.

Braid a carrying strap from leftover yarn (or any yarn you like). Sew it neatly onto the top of the bag at two opposite points. Cut or make two drawstrings — they work better if they are *not* wool. Shoelaces, smooth cotton string, and braided cotton embroidery thread work well. Thread both drawstrings in and out between the stitches in the third row from the top of the bag. Knot the two ends of each drawstring together. Pull one drawstring from each side to close the bag.

Simple bags like this often show up in medieval paintings with three to five tassels along the bottom.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Knitting seems to have been invented sometime late in the first millennium AD, perhaps as early as the 8th century. The earliest pieces of surviving knitting — which are all from Islamic countries — are dated by their style of decoration to the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries. Even these earliest pieces are filled with intricate, multi-colored designs. The color patterns for this project are based on some of these early Islamic pieces.

The earliest knitted items in what's now Western Europe are from Spain. These early items include a pair of bishop's ceremonial gloves (dated around 1245) and two cushion-covers, again all with intricate color patterns.

Until the 1500s, knitting seems to have mostly been used for small items, including bags, hats of all kinds, long and short stockings, mittens and gloves. On the whole, knitted "body garments" seem to have been a late development.

Modern knitting has a large repertoire of decorative techniques, including color-patterned or "stranded" knitting, texture patterns using knit and purl, cables and twisted stitches, and openwork or "lace", whose basic unit is an open eyelet, made by wrapping thread an extra time around the needle and then knitting two stitches together.

Of these techniques, color patterning is the only one used in the earliest knitting. It may even be one of the reasons knitting became popular, since it takes no big, expensive loom to produce detailed, multicolored patterns in knitting. Close to 1600 we see the first texture patterns, but the great explosion of lace, cables, and so forth doesn't happen until the 19th century.

Decorative motifs on knitting seem to come largely from whatever is currently in fashion in woven fabrics of the same period. Many of the Islamic designs are flower-like or geometric elements, like those in carpets or Asian brocades. In periods where horizontal stripes or bands of motifs are common in woven materials, they also appear in knitting.

The Islamic textiles in particular have a strong sense of symmetry: one green stripe will be between two gold stripes, or a larger pattern between two bands of the same smaller design. You can see this symmetry in both of the color charts in this pattern.

If you're interested in more detail about the history of knitting, both before and after 1600, the book to get is Richard Rutt's **A History of Hand Knitting** (now unfortunately out of print). The book is a classic, and while it's not always well organized, Rutt is a good scholar and lays out the reasons for his conclusions. Rutt's analysis of nalbinding and other techniques that are often confused with knitting is a model of clarity. There is also a good deal of material in the book about knitting myths and pseudo-historical sources to avoid.
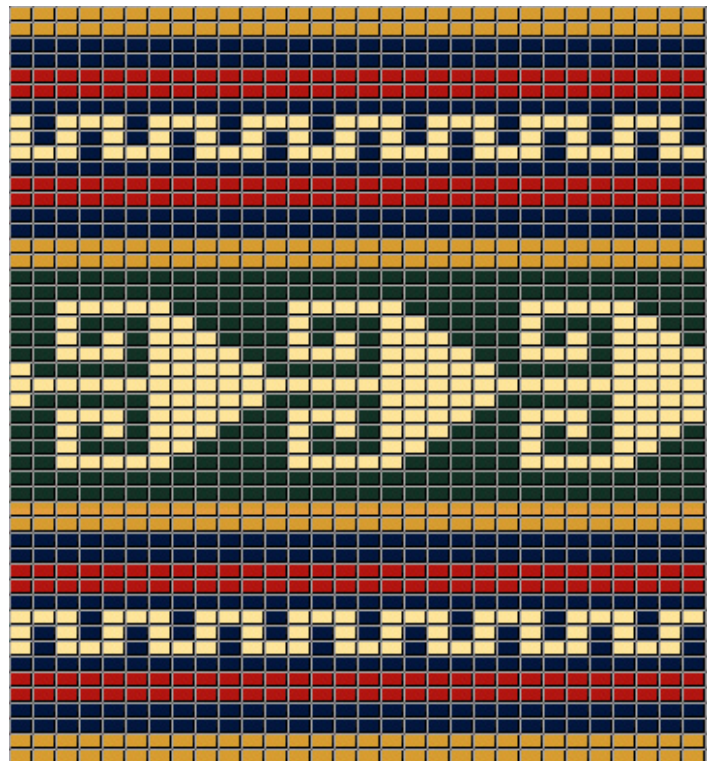
MORE HISTORICAL KNITTING

My enthusiasm for re-creating knitted items from the Middle Ages and Renaissance is shared with a number of other historical knitters. Two likely gathering spots if you wish to participate in this kind of experimentation and discussion are the HistoricKnit list on Yahoo!Groups (http://groups.yahoo. com/group/HistoricKnit/) and the Historic Knitting Group at Ravelry.com (http://www.ravelry.com/groups/historic-knitting).

Contact the author at <claning@igc.org>.

Color chart #2: *start with 60 or 70 stitches.*