

### Three Bags Full

I am a knitter; I am also a poor student. These two facts together make me the type of consumer I am: I buy food, I buy hard wearing clothing used from thrift stores, and I buy yarn and other knitting notions (needles, pins, buttons, thread, etc.).

Knitting was not historically a hobby, but it has become so in the last twenty or thirty years. It is notoriously difficult to find academic papers detailing the history of knitting: the short description that follows is from a popular history from [knitty.com](http://knitty.com). During the first few hundred years of its history, mainly in Egypt and Spain, knitted objects were luxury, nonessential items, such as ecclesiastical gloves, pillows, and small bags, made on needles so small that no one in this day and age (without masochistic tendencies) would dare duplicate. Once commoners learned how to knit, they started a widespread cottage industry, as well as knitting garments for themselves. It became a thrifty way to make things for oneself and one's family, then reverted to an aristocratic luxury (such as during the Victorian period) several times and back again. This continued until the 1960s or 70s, when knitting was still routinely taught in public school. Then it fell out of fashion, only to be revived in the current renaissance. Knitting is a wildly popular hobby at the moment, spawning yarn stores all over the place (most of the older ones died out during the 80s). New knitting websites (the most popular ones being [knitty.com](http://knitty.com) and [ravelry.com](http://ravelry.com)) and blogs are increasingly popular; most of the knitting jargon used in this article originates from these websites.

Nowadays, knitting has definitely become a luxury again. Buying luxury yarn (hand spun, hand dyed, silk or cashmere) at an independent yarn store can run upwards of 30 or 40 dollars per hundred grams. One can always buy a hat or sweater dirt-cheap; therefore, most people do not realize the time and money put into a piece of hand-knitting. A hat made of high quality wool can cost 10-20\$ for the yarn alone, not taking into account the cost of the pattern -especially if you believe designers deserve to be paid well. Then there is the hours spent knitting, finishing (weaving in ends, felting, adding buttons, etc.) and blocking (washing and pinning while wet into the desired shape to even out the stitches and relax the fabric). Yarn is something which is bought, then transformed through the skill/practice of knitting into something useful such as a sweater, bag, scarf, hat, etc. and ideally of good quality so that it will hopefully be worn or used for many years. The wearability is contingent upon several factors: the degree to which the object or piece of clothing is classic, elegant and will not go out of style; In fact, the 'crafty' look is very much outside of mainstream fashion); the quality of the materials used eg. will the dye fade, will the yarn wear, does the recipient know how to properly care for their gift; and then finally the skill and patience of the knitter. If you notice a mistake several rows or inches back, do you have the patience and fortitude to rip it back and fix it, or can you live with the mistake and ignore it every time you wear the hat? Personally, I find that if I make a mistake, I will always see it and it will bother me forevermore. It's worth unraveling and fixing the mistake. At the same time, if at some point I no longer like what I have produced or can't stand the mistakes any more, I can almost always take it apart and reuse the yarn, continuing a tradition of hundreds of years of thriftiness. Some knitters refer to themselves as 'process knitters': they knit primarily for the joyful movement of the needles and yarn, without worrying overmuch if the completed item is ugly or doesn't fit. I, however, am a product knitter: I make things when I or a friend needs them (though don't expect to receive the item for several months!), and if it doesn't turn out the way I had anticipated, I rip it apart and go back to the drawing board.

Whenever I work with beautiful hand-dyed yarn and I find the most beautiful stitch pattern possible to bring out the colours, I feel as though I am fulfilling someone else's artistic vision: that of the individual who dyed the yarn with their own hands. Perhaps 'fulfilling' is not quite right. It's more as though I have become an

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active participant in the process begun before I bought the fiber. I am utilizing my own creativity to fulfill the destiny of the yarn.

## Shopping

Going to a yarn store is not a journey to be undertaken lightly. The closest yarn store is a good half hour's walk from my apartment. As there is no convenient bus line from here to there, it's either an hour and a half taken from my day or six dollars' metro fare which could have been spent on yarn!. Therefore, it usually falls somewhere between a pleasure jaunt: usually very expensive, and a quest: planning to buy yarn for a specific project.

First, I must decide why I am embarking on this particular quest. Several factors must be weighed: my financial situation, the urgency of production of a knitted piece, the weather or walking conditions, and my overwhelming desire to complete said project. Do I have a particular pattern in mind? Am I planning on using the pattern-recommended yarn, or browsing a bit for a similar, perhaps slightly less expensive choice? Is the end product intended for me, or is it a gift for someone else? Is it urgent: is there an imminent baby, a birthday or a holiday fast approaching for which a gift is required? It is freezing outside and do I have mittens? Have I just received a pay cheque from work or a cash present from a sympathetic relative? Or am I obsessed with watching the knitting materialize past my needles, and, having run out of yarn, need to know what magical part of the product happens next!?

The local yarn store (LYS) is a dizzying array of choice. Wooden bookcases line the walls, packed to the brim with yarn just begging to be touched, seducing the knitter with colour, sheen and texture. Yarn still in bags sit atop the tall bookshelves, squeezed in tight almost up to the ceiling. Overflow from the shelves and discount yarn sits in baskets on the floor, making the corridors very narrow in certain parts. This is not a space designed to have too many people circulating. In the back, beside the cash register is a large table with chairs and a couple of armchairs, for knitting nights, private lessons or if people want to sit and peruse knitting magazines. There are 'sample knits' everywhere, sweaters and hats and shawls and scarves on half-mannequin torsos demonstrating what a certain type of yarn could become, with expertise, materials and time. Hanging on the wall behind the counter are the knitting 'notions': hooks, needles, buttons and other tools.

All of the LYS's I have frequented have been very similar. There seems to be a new aesthetic to yarn stores since the 'renaissance' of hobby knitting, and this formula is very duly followed. The above description would fit at least three of the LYS's in Montreal perfectly, the only variation being the location of the couches, and occasionally a sewing section. The staff are always very proficient and enthusiastic knitters who teach classes and can usually help you if you've made a mistake. They'll gladly tender assistance to shoppers, sometimes proffering large baskets to those whose arms are full of yarn. They give advice on yarn colour and substitutions in certain patterns. At the till they might ask what you are planning to knit, and exclaim if they think it's a good choice. They are people who completely understand the knitters they cater to, and just feel very happy that they have been able to transform a beloved hobby into a paying job.

I always take a long time in the store: at least forty-five minutes. I go around and pet as many yarns as possible, not just the ones in my price bracket (in fact, these ones tend to be the most luscious) or that I intend on purchasing. If a certain corner of the room is dark, I take the yarn to a window or other light source to inspect the colour and other characteristics. Every skein of yarn signifies myriad possibilities in shape, style, stitch patterns and colour combinations: shopping for yarn requires an imagination. Patterns come with one recommended yarn in one colour, by one brand, and it is definitely an asset to be able to visualize how a certain

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yarn would 'knit up' to create a certain pattern. Though every knitter has a 'stash' of yarn at home, the yarn was never bought simply to sit there and be petted. Each skein is expectantly waiting to be wound into a ball and transformed.

There are varying degrees of financial security, depending on the reason for the yarn store visit. The most secure is when one simply needs more yarn in order to complete an already-started project. There is a clear goal: I must buy this needed yarn so that I can keep knitting. It's possible that I might become sidetracked, but the softness/fiber content, price and colour have already been selected ahead of time, which makes it much easier to get in and get out without having spent vast amounts of cash on 'unnecessary' purchases. However, most of the time I do fall prey to impulse buys, though I limit them to extraordinarily beautiful or clearance yarn. Usually I will only give in if I have been 'visiting' the yarn for several weeks or months since I only go to the yarn store once or, exceptionally, twice a month. Incidentally, this is also how I acquired many small pets as a child and teenager. I would convince my mother and younger brother to go to the pet store every so often, and would invariably become attached to some guinea pig or rabbit. This would always be the ugliest, meanest animal which no one wanted, so it was at the pet store for several months. On one occasion, we even named a guinea pig ('George', in case you were wondering), and would say "Let's go visit George at Petcetera". Eventually the pet store manager offered him to us for half price, as he had not been handled for so long that he had become quite aggressive and when someone took him out of the cage, he bit them. Within fifteen minutes, I had him snuggled up to me. I suppose that yarn must be my substitute for small fuzzy animals: my partner is horribly allergic to all these bundles of joy, but not to hats and scarves.

Last fall I found \$105.00 in the metro and promptly gave it to the STM employee in case someone came looking for it. I gave her my phone number in case no one did, at which point it was implied that she would return it to me. Feeling flush from this unexpected windfall, I agreed to go to the yarn store with a friend and ended up spending over fifty dollars. However, I never got the money back from the STM. This unlucky turn of events did not mitigate the blissful effect of the luxury yarn gracing my bedside table. Every time I come home with yarn I should not have bought, the guilt only lasts until I start knitting with the fiber, at which point it all becomes worth it.

When perusing the yarn store, these are some of the criteria for choosing yarn:

- Fiber content: wool, nylon, acrylic, alpaca, cashmere, bamboo, cotton, yak, goat, mohair, sea wool (made from seaweed), silk, mulberry fiber, camel... the list goes on and on. All the fibers have certain properties which must be taken into account.
  - Washability: Is it a delicate fiber that must be hand-washed? Will it felt? Has it been chemically treated so that it can be washed in the washing machine?
  - Wearability and Durability: Will it pill? Will it stretch out of shape when worn? Is it a workhorse yarn that will last forever, or a delicate luxury yarn? Is the pattern I am considering intended for me or someone else? Does it fit into that person's wardrobe?
  - Texture: How soft is it? Is there a sample knit up, so I can touch it? Yarn often feels very different knit up than in the skein or ball. Is the yarn fuzzy? Does it have a 'halo'? How has it been spun? Is it handspun?
  - Weight: What is the thickness (thread, cobweb, lace, fingering, DK, sport, worsted, aran, bulky, super bulky)? What needle sizes and types are recommended? Do I have those or will I have to spend another thirty dollars on needles?
  - Price and availability: Is it on sale? Clearance? Whenever wool is dyed the colour is slightly different, and so these are marked by dye-lots. Is there more of the same colour if I run out and require more?
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- **Colour:** Is the yarn natural and undyed? The colours of sheep range from very light beige through all the greys imaginable to browns and almost black. Is it hand dyed? This is more expensive, but hand dyed yarn is usually really beautiful, though there are irregularities and it's difficult to match yarn colour for bigger projects. Are the dyes used natural or toxic chemical dyes? Is it a solid colour, or heathered? Stripes or variegated? Are they short or long colour repeats?
- **Social and Environmental Impact:** Fair trade? Organic? Want to support a certain coop in a certain region? I have a friend who favours Latin American yarn (her family is Chilean). Other people are willing to sacrifice a bit of softness and pay more for organic wool. Organic cotton tends to be softer and better quality than normal cotton. I own some lovely bamboo yarn from South Africa whose label claims that the yarn was made as part of a women's job creation coop in South Africa, and thanks you for supporting the coop. I must admit that I only bought it because it was half price. However, it still makes me feel a little happier when I read the label. Vegans knit, too, and some of them avoid animal fibres in favour of man-made. If you ever decide to watch a video of a sheep being sheared, you might too.

I don't feel terribly manipulated by marketers aesthetically, because I get what I pay for: if I buy a quality yarn, there are no surprises. I am not usually buying it for what it is, but what I will make of it: it is not a finished object, but a stage in a process. The yarn has not been doctored with smells or tastes past washing and treating so that it no longer smells like wet sheep or chemical dyes. I buy it because of the inbuilt qualities of touch and visual appeal. The only advertisements for yarn which I see are online, and the appeal is basically visual. Most ads simply have a picture of wonderfully colourful yarn, perhaps with a finished object made from the same, and the name of the company that produces it. Of course, yarn companies have jumped on the eco-friendly, sustainable and fair trade bandwagon: these labels usually contribute to the feel-good aspect of the purchase.

If I don't find the exact colour I want, I tend to not buy as much as I had anticipated. However, usually I buy a couple of skeins more than I had planned on purchasing. I'm quite a slow knitter, and I've never made anything very large, such as a sweater, so thankfully I don't buy sweater-amounts on impulse since for a long-sleeved adult sweater, you're looking at about 40\$ bare minimum, using the cheapest wool on a whim. I usually spend between \$20-35 or three or four skeins or balls, which will make me several projects.

The moment I get out of the store, I take the yarn out of my bag and look at it in natural light. On the walk home, I will periodically reach into my bag and touch the yarn, just to make sure it's still there and as soft as ever.

## **Home**

When I get home I will usually take the yarn out of my bag and, if I'm excited about starting or completing a project, I'll wind the skein into a ball right away to prepare it for knitting. This involves taking off the tags and putting them in a safe place so that I can find them again should I require more of the yarn. Through this step the yarn loses its identifiers and becomes mine. Whether or not I wind it, it will probably sit in a prominent place either on or in the first drawer of my bedside table or on my vanity next to my jewelry and school books, where I can pick it up whenever I want and touch it or look at it in different lighting. I usually compare it to others there for purposes of striping or some other sort of knitting colour work, sometimes carrying it to my stash to do the same with the yarn in bags and boxes. I almost think of yarn as decoration. I

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spend a lot of time in my bedroom because my apartment is very small, and it makes me happy to have so much potential lying around within arm's reach. It also makes it very convenient for reaching over and starting or continuing a piece of knitting at a moment's whim. I am the kind of knitter who always have several projects in various stages of completion on the go, so I don't tend to get bored of knitting; if I get frustrated I can always work on something else.

I have some yarn which I have not found the perfect pattern for, which lives in my 'stash'. These are typically 'special' in some way: they are hand-dyed, they were very expensive, the factory burned down and there won't be any more produced (true story!). These yarns are the most fondled, and they are beginning to show the wear just a little bit. The skeins are getting a bit untidy; the yarn is pilling slightly; labels have been lost and they may have acquired a bit of dust. I don't make these ones into balls because they aren't ready to be knit up yet; skeins are better for long-term storage because the form doesn't put stress on the fiber. Every so often I lay out my stash on my bed (usually according to colour). Reviewing the stash is, first and foremost, a review of fantastical possibilities for making others and myself happy.

Before knitting, sometimes knitters dye their own yarn at home, leaving yet another mark on the yarn and making it their own. This can be done with either natural, undyed yarn or yarn which is not a good colour (in this case, the term used is 'over-dyeing'). Usually they use commercial fabric dyes, natural dyes such as blackberries, onion skins and lichen, or the perennial favourite for nontoxic dyeing in neon colours: Kool-Aid. As though we needed another reminder to never drink the stuff again!

When I actually get to the knitting stage, every inch of the fiber comes in contact with my fingers at least twice: once with my right hand, as I am tensioning the yarn from the ball and looping it around a needle to make a stitch, and the second time with my left, as I push the stitches up the left needle to the tip. I also feel the texture of the knitted fabric periodically. This ensures that I notice every textural irregularity and knot. My fingers appropriate the yarn and transform it. One of the biggest thrills of knitting is finding bits of moss or very very small twigs that have been accidentally spun into the yarn I'm working with. I love coming across these; others find it irritating and complain about the bad carding and washing job. Far from annoying me, every time the smooth flow of yarn over my fingers is slightly interrupted by a rough spot, I am delightfully reminded that what I'm working with was once the woolly coat of a sheep that rubbed itself on a fencepost when it was itchy. Then I carefully pick it out, because who wants bits of moss in a soft scarf?

When connecting two ends (this only works with wool), I felt them together. I split, then fan out the two yarn ends, then mix the fibers together and spit on them. I literally imbue them with my bodily fluid, then rub the join vigorously between my palms, the friction heating them up, until the join becomes felted and strong. My hands and the yarn now smell like wet wool and heat: it's a very peculiar and particular odour. After smelling my palms, I always have a curious longing to go help a sheep farmer deliver lambs.

Knitters are consumers, in that they buy yarn. However, the act of purchasing is merely a step in a larger process of continued creativity and, often, generosity. The number of socks and hats one knitter can produce in a few years far exceeds his or her capacity to wear them, so many are gifted, usually to terribly appreciative people. The internet knitting community is renowned for their reciprocity and collaborative nature; if a knitter needs help with a tricky pattern, hundreds of their fellows may come to their aid. Knit-a-longs are popular (this is when many people decide to make the same pattern at once, posting updates regularly and supporting one another morally), as are gift exchanges across borders. The act of knitting ties one to a larger community, with which it is possible to connect anywhere that there are people wearing recognizably hand-knitted clothing.

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While reading Hyperaesthesia (Howes, 2005), the concept of *jikkan*- 'retrospection through actual sensation'- resonated with me. While experiencing the tactile sensations of knitting or even simply wearing handknitted clothing, I feel a connection to generations of men and women who took pride in what they wore and lived in less sterile sensual environments than I. I smell wet sheep; hear them baa-ing (luckily I don't taste mutton). I see images of women in co-ops in Uruguay, hanging up sopping wet skeins of yarn to dry. I discuss the finer points of stockinette stitch with real people who I meet and dream of the perfect shawl to make my mother-in-law happy. In purchasing a skein of yarn I am making an imaginative and technical commitment to myself and others. I am supporting an industry which allows people to do what they love, and that's better than buying a 10\$ sweater made in China any day.

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### Bibliography

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