



*Heimilisiðnaðarsafnið - Textile Museum*

# THE ICELANDIC WOOL SWEATER

## ORIGIN – HISTORY - DESIGN

The Icelandic wool sweater has developed through the centuries from a sturdy item of work clothing, used primarily in difficult outdoor jobs on sea and land, to being a national souvenir and a popular fashion item. In a way, the sweater reflects the lifestyle and history of a nation and tells a story of changing economic and social circumstances of Icelanders.

The exhibition is designed as a traveling exhibition and was first opened at the Museum of Design and Applied Art in December 2017. The exhibition is based on research projects by the Textile Museum, the Museum of Design and Applied Art and Gljúfrasteinn – Laxness Museum, the poet's house.

This web exhibition reflects the exhibition as it was set up as a special exhibition at the Textile Museum in Blönduós in 2019 - 2020. The creation of the web exhibition was supported by the Museum Council of Iceland.



# HÖNNUNARSAFN ÍSLANDS

MUSEUM OF DESIGN AND APPLIED ART



GLJÚFRASTEINN  
*Laxness Museum*



SAFNARÁÐ  
The Museum Council of Iceland



Knitting has always been primarily done by women and Icelandic women are credited with making the Icelandic wool sweater a desirable souvenir and export item. Training and experience, a good perception of form and pattern making, a sensitivity towards colour schemes as well as the pleasure of knitting have been the fundamental elements of the design of the wool sweater.

The Icelandic wool sweater has become a classic although to some extent it does follow the trends of fashion. Most Icelanders are fortunate enough to own at least one wool sweater, which more often than not is knitted by someone close to them, making life warmer and better.

## From Cottage Industry to Factory Production

Wool work was an important cottage industry in Iceland in the past and knowing how to comb, spin and knit wool was a basic skill. Every able-bodied member of a household took part in this craft.

The Icelandic wool is characterized by the two parts of the fleece: the "tog", which is similar to guard hair and "þel", a type of down hair. The þel is closer to the skin, the hairs are soft, fine, short and springy. The tog is the outer part of the fleece and is made up of long, coarse and shiny hairs. The tog was mainly used in clothing that was meant to be durable while þel was used in items that had to be softer to the touch. The þel is airy and provides good insulation but the tog is water and moisture repellent.

When wool work became a factory industry in the late 19th century, combing and spinning was done by machines. The machines couldn't separate the þel from the tog so the Icelandic "lopi" or sliver we know today is in fact a mixture of þel and tog.

A sliver is the long bundle of yarn that comes after the fleece is combed, before it is spun on a spinning wheel or spindle. Knitting the sliver unspun was not done in the past but when Icelanders started experimenting with it, they found that the clothing became much warmer.





Colour schemes of the icelandic wool and samples of „tog“ and „þel“.

## The Sailor Sweater

The Icelandic "vistarband", a form of serfdom, was abolished around 1900. As a result, labourers moved from rural areas to towns looking for new opportunities and many men went to sea. This greatly increased the demand for comfortable work sweaters that could be made quickly. Already in the 18th century, Icelanders were knitting coarse sweaters from spun tog, in part for export.

Faroese sailor sweaters were very popular advertised goods in Iceland around 1900. This indicates that Icelanders weren't necessarily selling their knitted sweaters at that time. After seamanship increased in Icelandic waters, various changes can be detected in the knitting traditions of the nation.

The Icelandic sailor sweater was the wool sweater's predecessor in terms of using the sliver and how quickly they could be knitted. Sailors all over Northern Europe wore sailor sweaters when working. The wool's warmth and the stretch of the knit were a good combination for these work clothes.

The sailor sweater's patterns differed from one country to the next and sometimes even from one crew to the next but they were usually black on a white background. For a long time the patterns on the foreign sailor sweaters were related to Christian symbols like crosses and stars and were possibly meant for protection. The Icelandic sailor sweaters didn't have a pattern. The black and white appearance was achieved by mixing two or three colours together that created a kind of speckled appearance.



Unknown who knitted the original sweater, but it is believed to have been in the years 1920-1940. Remake 2018. Vilborg Einarsdóttir.



## Product Development

The teaching of handicraft, including knitting, became a compulsory subject in Iceland's elementary schools in 1936. The founding of a girls' school, a home economics school and industrial arts school, as well as the robust work of the Icelandic Craft Centre (Heimilisiðnaðarfélag Íslands) and the Icelandic Wool Office (Skrifstofan "Íslenzk ull") in the early 20th century laid the foundation for a powerful crafts industry and a proliferation of knitting skills.

In 1939, Anna Ásmundsdóttir and Laufey Vilhjálmsdóttir founded the Icelandic Wool Office. At the time, demand for wool products had increased significantly. One of the Office's primary objectives was to encourage Icelanders to produce as much as they could from their own wool. Anna and Laufey also encouraged good quality products and would hold competitions looking for beautiful woolen sweaters with an Icelandic look that harmonized with the fashion trends of the time. They felt that Icelandic wool products had great marketing potential, both domestically and abroad.

"It doesn't get better than an Icelandic sweater" - Slogan, Icelandic Wool Office, Vísir 1938

"We have to see to it that our wool can become material for a fashion garment, a luxurious product as well as being a vital necessity." - Útvarpstíðindi 1940

Just before 1940, the Icelandic Wool Office held an exhibition where 150 women showcased various wool products. The growth of the company was such that in 1940, well over 400 people were working for the company, doing both hand and machine knitting.

The Icelandic Wool Office's slogan was "Wool is gold."



The original sweater was knitted by  
Guðrún Björnsdóttir 1854-1946.  
Remake 2018. Vilborg Einarssdóttir.

## New Lifestyle

Among the main characteristics of the Icelandic wool sweater is the row of patterns around the shoulder area. It is not clear when precisely the sweater emerged in this characteristic look but its appearance can be traced back to patterned sweaters from the 1930s and 40s. Auður Sveinsdóttir Laxness (1918-2012) had a great part in shaping the look of the Icelandic wool sweater and promoting it through her social network. No single knitter "designed" the sweater. Instead, its design and appearance came from many influential factors, not in the least the fact that it had to be made quickly.

The knitter of this sweater, which was owned by Halldóra Bjarnadóttir (1873-1981 yes, she did reach 108 years of age) is unknown. The sweater has so called sliced decrease (*sneiðingsúrtaka*) which was a form of raglan decrease. The rows of patterns create a full circle, although it is skewed in parts where stitches were decreased. A round decrease (*hringúrtaka*) then developed between the rows of patterns and so the row formed a full circle.

Norse knitting designer Unn Dale published a knitting pattern for a sweater with decrease within the motif (*geislaúrtaka*) in 1954, where the units of pattern themselves were decreased, a method that was also picked up in Iceland.

Outdoor activities such as hunting, riding, sailing and mountain climbing that had been part of people's livelihood before, became leisure activities of the wealthier social groups in the 1930s when health and outdoor living became part of a lifestyle. These changes also affected fashion since outdoor and sporting clothes became part of this new lifestyle and it became fashionable to wear Icelandic wool sweaters made of yarn or sliver.

Icelandic women improvised their knitting and many had ambitions never to repeat the same pattern. The knitters also developed the knitting technique when making the wool sweater, creating a hand-knitted and fast-knitted "mass-produced" product.



Unknown who knitted the original sweater, but it is believed to have been in the years 1930 - 1940. Remake 2018. Vilborg Einarsdóttir.

## Inspiration

Icelandic handicrafts from the past are rich in patterns, especially in textiles and embroidery. Icelandic knitters drew from this well. Patterns were also inspired by carvings as well as natural forms like mountain peaks and cloud banks. Books on textiles and embroidery, published by Halldóra Bjarnadóttir and the Icelandic Craft Centre from 1928 until the mid 40s, had a great impact. Little by little, the Icelandic wool sweater starts to reflect the Icelandic artistic values and the craftsmanship heritage of the past in terms of the wool, the sheep colours, the knitting tradition and the rich pattern heritage.

Influence from Greenland was also visible in Iceland in the 40s in the look and placement of the pattern rows that resembled the beaded collar of the Inuit women's national costume. This can primarily be traced back to tourists and soldiers in Iceland who found this both exotic and desirable. Knitted "Greenland" sweaters became a popular souvenir in Iceland, but this influence from Greenland can also be found in the sweater fashion of Denmark, Sweden and Norway.



## The First Knitting Pattern Published on Print

The Icelandic wool sweater had become a popular souvenir in the 1940s and 50s. The number of shops that sold the wool sweater had increased a great deal by the 1950s.

Knitting wool sweaters could make a difference for a family's income and when demand grew, the wool factories saw a profitable opportunity both in selling the sweaters as souvenirs to tourists, and as an export. This meant a greater need for knitters who had the required skills. In *Eldhúsbókin* (The Kitchen Book) from 1963, a knitting pattern was published on print for the first time, a recipe for the Icelandic wool sweater. In the late 1960s and in the 70s, wool factories Álafoss and Gefjun held contests for the best wool sweater patterns. The goal was to increase the variety of patterns for pattern books that would be included with packed coils of sliver. Souvenir shops and factories collaborated with knitters on sweaters in matters of design, size and workmanship.



Knitting pattern from 1963. Hólmfríður Árnadóttir.  
Knitted by Vilborg Einarsdóttir 2018.



## Our Wool Sweater

For decades, the wool sweater has played a major role in the lives of Icelanders.

If you have photos featuring wool sweaters in your family photo album, please send them to us and we will add them to the exhibition



## Mass Production and Export

The wool industry in Iceland was a thriving industry from around 1960 until the 1980s. Fashion began to have a greater impact after 1960. The wool sweater had caught on and fashion shows were held where this desirable product was modelled.

When Iceland joined EFTA (European Free Trade Area) in 1970, the wool industry became a great export and the wool factories Gefjun in Akureyri and Álafoss in Mosfellsbær grew in size. In 1968, Iceland's herring stock collapsed and unemployment grew so the opportunity to make wool products was a welcome relief for the nation.

There was great demand for Icelandic sweaters, both in Iceland as well as abroad. The Icelandic wool products were considered natural and artistic. The key behind the "mass production" of Icelandic wool sweater is the fast knitting technique developed by the Icelandic knitters.

The Handknitting Association of Iceland was founded in 1977 with the goal to guard the wages and rights of knitters and knit designers. When export and sales of hand-knitted wool sweaters were at their peak, the fastest knitters were knitting four to five sweaters a week on average.



Pattern from around 1970. Knitted by Valgerður Guðmundsdóttir.

## After a decline, knitting enjoys a revival

In 1973, the wool industry had become the third largest industry in Iceland and maintained that status for many years. In the early 1970s, Álafoss, Gefjun and Hilda founded their own design departments with talented pattern designers, knitters and educated textile designers. Knitters were asked to create prototypes as well as patterns for brochures.

The wool sweater patterns were published in the form of leaflets, knitting brochures or knitting books. The wool factories were thus controlling which patterns were presented as desirable. After 1980, the factories' knitting designers oversaw the design of patterns and the look of the sweaters knitted by the general knitter.

Operational difficulties caused the consolidation of Gefjun and Álafoss in 1987 under the name Álafoss. After the consolidation, there was a decrease in handknitted production as the main emphasis was placed on machine-knitted clothing. During this time, Icelandic wool products lost their popularity in Iceland and the reasons were said to be caused by fashion trends and ineffective marketing. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 caused the Russian market to fail. That same year, Álafoss was declared bankrupt.

The hand-knitted wool sweater did however endure in the hands of Icelandic women knitters who had previously worked for the big companies but now worked mainly for the souvenir market.

The company Ístex was founded after Álafoss' bankruptcy. From the beginning, Ístex manufactured yarn made from Icelandic wool for hand knitting and published popular books on hand knitting. In the first few years, three women worked in sales and design; designer Védís Jónsdóttir, textile and industrial engineer Guðríður Ásgeirsdóttir and Þrúður Helgadóttir, who was in charge of sales and marketing. They can be credited with renewing Icelanders' interest in knitted products in the form of knitting pattern which greatly increased the sales of yarn.



Above: Originally made for Calvin Klein.  
Steinunn Sigurðardóttir 1991.

Below: Knitting pattern for Ístex 2004. Guðrún R. Sigurjónsdóttir. Knitted by Vilborg Einarssdóttir.

## **Creation and Development**

In the last few years, the Icelandic wool sweater has had a favourable wind. Around the turn of the millennium, the so-called "cute generation" in Iceland adopted the sweater which in a way reflected the group's values in their search for the noble and the authentic. With increased tourism, the demand for the wool sweater has multiplied. This development has led some Icelandic companies to having the sweater manufactured abroad to bring down cost of production and to meet demand. The Icelandic hand knitting industry has been very vocal about the need for labelling Icelandic wool sweaters with their origin, so that it is clear that they were knitted in Iceland and that the patterns are indeed Icelandic.

We should honour the wool sweater, protect it and maintain its status, yet at the same time we should not be afraid to be experimental and creative. The joy of creativity has always been a part of the Icelandic wool sweater.





# ANNEX

## from the Textile Museum



The three original sweaters visible in the exhibition are preserved in Halldórustofa (Halldóra's room) in the Textile Museum in Blönduós.

## Duggarapeysan – The Sailor Sweater

Quotation from Halldóra Bjarnadóttir (1873-1981):

*“During the crisis years, 1920-40, thousands of such sweaters were handknitted and sold to fishing tackle shops in Reykjavík and in Akureyri. Wanted.”*

The Sailor Sweater was also an export product. They were knitted from a tripled thread of “tog” but with tripled thread of “bel” for the collar.





### Blómapeysan – The flower sweater

Rust-brown sweater with white pattern. Rose bed above the props and on the sleeves.

The sweater was knitted by Guðrún Björnsdóttir (1854-1946) from Mánaskál in Laxárdalur, Austur-Húnavatnssýsla.

It is believed that it is one of the first sweaters to be knitted from fleece (lopi) only.

## **Halldórupeysan – The Halldóra - sweater**

The sweater belonged to Halldóra Bjarnadóttir (1873 -1981) and is believed to have been knitted around 1940. It is not known who knitted it.

The sweater is knitted from spun wool, light rust brown with a white and dark rust brown pattern.

It is believed that the sweater was one of Halldóra's favorite garments as it is very worn.





The exhibition about the Icelandic lopa-sweater is based on a study  
by Ásdís Jóelsdóttir

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The web exhibition was set up in 2020 by the Textile Museum in  
Blönduós with support by the Museum Council of Iceland.

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