

Fantasy Islands

by Maddy Cranley

I don't know if you are a fan of the reality show "Survivor", but the latest in the series, filmed in the Pearl Islands really displays some captivating scenery. Besides, on a chilly autumn night, the panoramic views of the those islands' delicious beaches are enough to make anyone drop her knitting and dream. Certainly not all islands can guarantee a fantasy come true, but there are islands that have produced some magic - knitting magic. The Hebrides, Shetlands, Faeroe Islands and Iceland have all managed to pull a rabbit out of the hat and produce creative and vibrant knitting traditions from seemingly barren and isolated environments. Let's take a quick tour.

Starting off along the north-western coast of Scotland, we find the remote island of Eriskay in the Outer Hebrides, which has given us wonderful "ganseys", a traditional style of fishermen's sweater displaying knit and purl patterns with enchanting names such as Harbor Steps, Starfish, Waves and Anchor. Further to the north and east, The Shetlands which include Fair Isle in their island group, sit between the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, where they are three times closer to the capital of Norway than their own capital city of London, England. Despite its remoteness, Fair Isle has worked its way into our knitting vocabulary as a generic term to designate a technique that uses only two colors in a row. When this technique is cleverly planned, simple patterns and color combinations become as intricate as a detailed tapestry. As well, we must not forget that the beautiful Shetland lace knitting developed in these isles.

Traveling north and west, the Faeroe Islands appear. Knitters in this region have developed a distinctive type of shawl which has clever shaping to rest the shawl on your shoulders, keeping you warm. Five hundred miles off the northwest coast of Scotland from where we began, is Iceland which enjoys a knitting tradition identified by colorful Norwegian patterns knit with three strands of unspun lopi roving.

A hundred years ago or earlier, when many of these knitting traditions were developed, the common thread among these isolated communities was that livelihoods depended on fishing and farming - outdoor work. So it becomes a study in how to make a living and stay warm doing it. Peoples who lived in isolated locations that long ago had no catalog house to call or mall to wander. Clothing was fashioned from locally available materials and in the case of these remote islands - sheep's wool. Add in human creativity with a desire to make something attractive, as well as practical, and a stunning Fair Isle sweater is born.

These islands were ports of call for traders as far away as the Black Sea and Mediterranean areas. Perhaps, a bright spark in the daily life on these islands, was a visitor from a foreign land, bringing the exotic and new. Possibly, a gift of a knitted shawl was brought from Estonia or Russia to woo a local girl. Maybe the patterns were copied and adapted, with locally-gathered dyes used to liven up the neutral shades of the sheep's wool. Was this an island knitter's fantasy - dreams of foreign lands and romantic faraway places? As colors and patterns from "outside" were adopted and entrenched into island cottage life, over time it developed into a cottage industry. Now Fair Isle cardigans, Icelandic pullovers, and Faeroe shawls are favorites on every knitter's list.

A fantasy of sitting in a cottage by the fire knitting to the roar of the ocean may sound idyllic but a hundred years ago, the harsh climate and rugged lifestyle would quickly dispense with such a cozy scene. In these times of oil exploration and the global economy, life on these islands has changed dramatically, but there are many a pair of warm hands and rested eyes that are glad for the modern conveniences. As these remote islands become more accessible to outsiders and the island's inhabitants find it easier to leave, we can't imagine that this type of creativity could ever flourish again in such an isolated cocoon.

A craft is a living thing, constantly changing, affected by how we live and what we need. Trends and traditions are developing around us and it may be only by looking back in another hundred years that presently developing knitting legacies will be evident.

Maddy Cranley is a professional knitwear designer, who has created exclusive designs for knitting and craft magazines, authored and published three books on the subject of creating felt garments and projects from handknitting, and produces an ever-growing line of maddy laine handknitting patterns. For additional information, see <http://www.maddycraft.com>

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