The DIY movement

From TV programs to YouTube to Michaels craft stores, one can reasonably deduce that the DIY (do it yourself) movement is more than a fad, that it has become a mania. My involvement in DIY is in the needlework area rather than the building trades, and my impetus to start knitting again was the birth of my first grandchild 11 years ago. But way before then, thanks to a needlepoint-er extraordinaire (my mother-in-law) and a knitter of many garments (my mom) I was heavily into both, with a dollop of crochet and crewel work added into the mix.

Aside from the horrendous inflation in the cost of materials for both crafts, I’m mostly enjoying my projects and even learning new skills from each. Considering that I started doing crewel work and needlepoint while my kids were very little and before I really entered the workplace full time, AND when I had a lot more patience and a lot better eyesight, I’m still persevering, most of the time.

Back in the 70s, when I lived near Boston, there was a wonderful artist named Elsa Williams who created beautiful crewel patterns and images and sold them as kits. You could pick up a “kit” of good quality linen, wool yarn, and instructions for A LOT less than today. You could even go out to her beautiful little shop in Townsend Massachusetts, which was truly the country back then, and have a great selection to choose from and get a little instruction if needed from the helpful shopkeepers.

Needlepoint kits were also plentifully available back then and you didn’t have to buy each component individually. Today you buy a painted canvas that ranges from $50 on up to hundreds, then all the yarns, and get basically no instructions, or very little. There are kits available. My favorites are from Ehrman Tapestry when I’m feeling flush, and there are still a few in the large craft stores, although the selection has dwindled to miniscule and the quality isn’t great.

The art of needlepoint

My mother-in-law used to buy blank canvas and create amazingly beautiful and intricate needlepoint pillows and hangings using pattern books and only the best Paternayan yarn. (I had no idea it is Persian, maybe I should hold on to the boxes I still have! Although I understand there is a “new” version – still as good?) For her, 12 squares/inch canvases was the absolute minimum to use for the best results, and sometimes she used a lot smaller mesh. She worked until her arthritis and eyesight prohibited, and I still hear her voice reminding me to be sure to put my initials on all my work. The initials are part of what I treasure about her handiwork still in my home today.
I’d like to know what sadist came up with the cross-stitch craze. Of course they’re not really a new phenomenon, samplers and such were done hundreds of years ago. And again, back in the 70s, (remember, younger and better eyesight) I bought a couple of cross-stitch kits in Denmark that were on very fine linen, none of this wimpy aida cloth for me! I actually did just finish one of them a few years ago; luckily it was the tail on a very cute mouse done previously. That tail was about all I could manage to finish the picture!

I have found knitting very cathartic, and if the pattern is not too complex it’s a great accompaniment to watching TV sports, particularly football which we watch quite a bit. I’ve branched out from knit/purl to more complex stitches and patterns, such as short row cowls and a ridiculously complex entrelac stitch top. The baby/toddler projects are the most fun, usually the easiest, and often the most appreciated by both me and baby’s parents. Of course I am often chided by my husband about the cost of the yarn. Couldn’t I buy these as finished items for much less? Well, yes and no. Isn’t it the thought that counts?! And the satisfaction of seeing something you made worn by the recipient is most rewarding.

**A variety of yarn**

Unfortunately, as a sign of the times my local Maryland privately owned knitting store has just closed after 13 years in business. I often preferred them to Michaels and Jo-Ann’s. No more fantastic (and rather expensive I admit) specialty yarns nor cozy place to sit and knit with others, no more classes on topics from how to fix mistakes to knitting wonderful specialty items. Oh well. Back to YouTube.

If you do knit or crochet, or want to start, and have not yet found the wonderful Ravelry website, be sure to go there soon. You can filter your pattern search by multiple criteria, from difficulty of pattern to type of project or fiber, needle size, to age of recipient and by my favorite choice – free!

One thing I learned from a course at that little local specialty store (now closing) is that patterns are sometimes actually edited over time. So that what I may have viewed as MY mistake could actually have been a mistake in the pattern. These mistakes may be corrected later in print versions, but could be found much more quickly if the pattern was online and dated accordingly. Who knew! Another, extremely valuable tip I received from that store was the name of a local person who finishes your projects. Can you knitters out there identify with that issue!!! (i.e., putting a piece together, or closure!) I’m sure it’s worth the money, I have a “few” such projects and will be giving her a call.

My husband and I travel often, and I have the habit of looking for a yarn shop everywhere we go. I have been quite surprised and dismayed at the paucity of such shops. This is true even in countries like New Zealand, Ireland and Scotland, where the raw materials (i.e. sheep) are plentiful. I learned in New Zealand that they ship their raw wool over to China to be processed, and then import it back. Nevertheless, I still
have a collection of yarns from those countries, and even some beautiful cotton yarn from Budapest from which I made a Child’s Gretel sweater pattern for grandchild #3. Quite proud that I finished it before she outgrew it! And of course you can purchase fiber from all over the globe in the best U.S. shops and online. Peruvian wool is particularly popular right now and some of it is wonderfully vibrant. They have sheep wool in addition to alpaca.

**Commemorating sheep and textiles**

There are wonderful wool and sheep festivals that take place all over the US, such as in Maryland and New York. Just do a search for sheep and wool or wool and sheep and you may find one near you. I also love that so many entrepreneurs are starting their own mills, a product of the “back to nature” movement as well as DIY.

I mentioned we travel a lot, and the textiles departments are some of my favorite museum collections. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has one of the most amazing but I’ve found textile collections, both large and small, from Boston to Chicago to Glasgow. I love ALL the textiles they show, from the carpets to the splendiferous church vestments to the wonderful clothing and samplers done by the “common” folk. They feed my imagination and confirm that the needlework DIY has a long pedigree indeed.

**For Further Reading**

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**About the Author**

Susan is the Engineering and Space Studies librarian at APUS. Susan Mandel Fingerman received her B.A. in Education from Brooklyn College, City University of New York, and her Masters in Library Science from Simmons College, Boston. Susan enjoys connecting information seekers with the resources they need to succeed. She also enjoys traveling with her husband, needlework, the beach, and being with
her grandchildren and family.