

A Brief History of Socks and Hand-knitted Footwear

(or Sock It To Me)

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No article of clothing has been more taken for granted than the humble sock, and yet, throughout history, language and customs it seems to have been an important part of everyday life. After all, warm dry feet have a lot to do with the overall quality of life as we know it. Do any of the following sound familiar? Knock the socks off of. Put a sock in it. Socking away money. Measured in your stocking feet.

This particular study will focus on Northern Europe, especially the British Isles. These climates were conducive to wearing warm covering for the feet, and wool was readily available. The true character of the humble sock comes from knitters who worked by the light of a peat fire, who knit as they walked down country lanes far across fields. They dreamed up lovely personalized patterns and decorated their simple finery with fancy stitches, embroidery and color. A true folk art.

The history of the unassuming sock is a long one. No one knows exactly when man first noticed that he was more comfortable with his feet covered. No doubt wrapping his tootsies in animal skins for better protection from the cold and the rough ground was a beginning. The concept of the sock does not appear in writing prior to the 8th century (History of Hosiery, Grass). The hieroglyphics of Ancient Egypt nor the Old Testament in Hebrew have any word for, or mention of, an inner foot covering. The Greek poet Hesiod who lived around 700 BC describes the daily life of a farmer. He warns of cold weather and goes on to advise him "And on your feet bind boots of the hide of the slaughtered ox, fitting them closely, when you have cushioned their insides with felt." The technique of matting animal hair into felt was very likely known to man before spinning or weaving.

Actual written reference to some form of sock appears just before the 1st century AD, by the people of the Roman Empire in reference to trade items with the Greeks. Wrapping of the feet and ankles with cloth or leather was commonly worn by older men and women as a protection from the cold. But this was looked on as a sign of weakness worn by any men who were not on military duty. By the end of the same century attitudes had changed and fascia (Latin) were now worn by men as a symbol of affluence (Horatius 8 BC- 65AD). Leg bindings were common attire for males at the time of Valerius Maximus, in his 1st century history of manners noting that fasciae worn by men were a sign of extraordinary refinement in dress.

About 50 BC when the Romans were headed north they discovered that the barbaric Gauls and Celts were wrapping cloth or leather strips around their bare legs or loose breeches (braacae Latin or broc Anglo Saxon). This was not only as protection from the cold but also from the thickets of the forest. The Romans latched on to this practical footwear concept and brought it home as the latest fashion.

During the 1st century AD it became more acceptable for men to wear leg coverings, and gradually it developed into a kind of felt slipper or sock of felt or fur, the udo. The udo differs from the fascia as it was pulled on rather than wrapped and was cut and formed from fabric or skins rather than strips. An archeological finding in Vindolanda in Northumberland, England in 1973 sheds some light on this practice. Several inked tablets were found near a site along Hadrian's wall. A fragment of a letter from home in Italy written to one of the Roman soldiers stationed there cites: "I have sent you two pairs of socks from Sattua, two pairs of sandals, and two sets of underwear." This was the first substantiated evidence that socks were worn in the northern climates. A sock-like article of clothing was uncovered at the Vindolanda site. It was believed to belong to a small child and was described as "a small bootee, reaching up to the ankle bone and constructed of two pieces of diamond twill clothe in wool one acting as the upper, and the other as the sole." The description is from Dr. Wild, professor of Archaeology at Manchester, England. As time passed references to socks become more common in literature and in physical findings.

After the fall of Rome in the 5th century the Saxons gained control of the Britain. They wore a loose tunic with tight fitting pants or broc. They also wore a short sock made of woven cloth or thin leather called a stoc or socque. A similar costume was common in Europe from the 5th to 11th centuries. By the 6th century loose breeches were generally adopted. They might be made of linen, wool or hide and were frequently cross gartered. These trouser-like garments became tighter over time, with the lower part from the knee down fitting close to the leg. By the 12th century these breeches were shortened to the knee and the lower leg was covered with a separate garment or hose (Anglo Saxon). These coarsely cut and sewn hose were made of linen or wool and seamed up the back. They might be footed, footless, or have a stirrup under the foot. Those with feet may even have a leather or felt sole attached. Shoemaking had become a highly skilled craft by the 12th century, and shoes could be worn on bare or stockinged feet. Men, always the first in fashion, wore hose that were knee length and often had an embroidered border at the top. Women's hose were similar but were worn above the knee and fastened with ties.

By the early 14th century Europe hose were worn in various lengths: from just below the calf, to the knee, or thigh-high. By this time, they were more decorative, with stripes of different colors or even each leg a different color. Soled hose continued to be worn until the late 15th century. Exaggerated toes became the fashion of the late 14th century. The stockings at this point were often decorative.

The stretch of the hose was created by cutting the plain-weave fabric on the bias. Advances in textile manufacture allowed for this change in fashion. Among the more flexible materials produced was scarlet. Scarlet was a fine elastic wool fabric and very suitable for making hosiery. It was dyed in many colors, but red was one of the most successful. This red has become the color we know as scarlet today.

In 1066 the Normans conquered Britain. Now hose played an important role in the evolution of costuming, especially for men. Women wore long skirts hiding their legs, so their leg coverings were not on display. But fashion was shortening men's tunics to jackets. Breeches were abandoned. As this occurred, men's hose took on a life of their own, extending up to the legs to meet at the crotch. These "tights" were attached to the jacket with laces. So by the late 1500's what had started as two stockings had become one garment reaching from the waist to the ankle and often covering the feet. Variations of this arrangement continued into the 1600's. These were made of fine silk, wool, or velvet, brightly colored and often highly decorated. They showed every muscle and flaw the wearer possessed. Some writers of the day labeled the style immodest.

To add to an already overwhelming display the jacket became shorter and a codpiece was added. But, I digress, and this is another study into itself.

By the late 16th century, true breeches were more common. A style called venetians ended just below the knee and were worn with stockings held up by garters. These stockings, similar to those familiar to us today, were made by using a remarkable technique, known as knitting. Knitting is the interlacing of a single thread into a series of connected loops to create a fabric. The oldest surviving examples of hand knitting are textile fragments dating from 200 AD. These were found in Syria, and definitely recognizable as socks. Knit fragments have also been found in Holland with two ivory knitting needles, dating back to the end of the 2nd century. The perfection of this craft as we know it was probably honed between 500 - 1200 AD in the Arabic countries. As people traveled, traded, and conquered new lands, thus did skills and ideas migrate. Many Europeans were discovering new ideas and skills as a result of the Crusades - circa 1095-1291. Knitting may have found its way to Europe with sailors or soldiers. It is equally possible that the craft traveled with Muslim expansion into Spain which began about 710 AD.

As the craft of knitting began to spread throughout Europe, the advantage of the knitted over the woven and sewn variety of hosiery became evident. Although the old styles were still worn, knitted stockings became increasingly popular. Knitted fabric was superior to the woven because it retained its shape, fit better, was more comfortable and flexible and offered more options in design and color.

As metalwork advanced, primarily in Spain and Italy, finer needles allowed for finer more detailed work. A pair of Spanish silk knitted stockings were the prized possession of Henry VIII of England. Henry's first "payre of long Spanish silke stockings" were a gift of Sir Thomas Greshman, an importer of stockings into England. Gresham continued his business during the reign of Elizabeth I. Knitted stockings were worn by Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. When Mary was executed 1586 she was wearing a pair of white knitted stockings held up with green garters.

The fashion of the day stressed a well-shaped leg for the gentlemen. The Spanish influence in courtly manners and proper court dress was evidenced throughout Europe and their style of silk stockings found their way as far north as Sweden by the 1560's.

By the time Elizabeth I took the throne in 1558, knitting was becoming a widespread craft. As the story goes, Mistress Montague gave the queen her first pair of silk knit stockings as a New Year's gift 1560. By 1588 she was sporting carnation pink and many other colors. She was also known to wear woven stocking underneath her silk ones to protect them from wear and perspiration. In 1577 however, she switched to knitted wool hose made locally in Norwich, an area known for its worsted wools and knitting.

In early 16th century most English children and country people wore wool socks. As the masses followed the styles, wool stockings became increasingly popular. The fashions of the 1500's with men's knee-length breeches created a need for stockings of all types. Women wore stockings, though they were seldom seen, their stockings were a necessary part of daily life. Technical terms for leg wear were changing too. By the mid 1600's the terms stockings and hose were synonymous.

Throughout all of the British Isles, stockings were being knit. Each area produced a different type of sock depending on the type of available wool. Stockings made in Yorkshire were coarse and hard wearing and were worn by the farm workers, soldiers, and children. The Welsh and Cornish ones were similar. Finer worsted stockings from the Midlands were worn by the merchants and the townspeople. Stocking were available in many styles, color and length. They could be plain or fancy with decorative scalloped ribbing or welts. Often, they have designs embroidered at the ankle called clocks. The origin of this name is obscure, but believed to resemble hands on a clock.

Due to their popularity and usefulness, the knitting of stockings as well as other articles of clothing offered a source of livelihood for many people. It became an industry in its own right. Knitting of stockings gave many a peasant laborer an independence he may not have had otherwise. Most mastered their skill and worked for themselves. They lived in rural communities, farmed the land and had enough time to supplement their income with this extra employment.

A knitting school opened in York in 1588 and another in Lincoln in 1591. Other schools popped up with the objective of helping the poor and providing a skill for idle hands who might otherwise be prone to mischief. By the end of the 1600's 1-2 million pairs of stockings were being exported from Britain to other parts of Europe. Hosiery has become highly specialized since all this, (example: fishnet stockings, pantyhose, thermal socks, tennis socks, lycra tights, kilt hose, etc.) Nevertheless, the basic form and function have remained the same for a long time. All from such humble beginnings.

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