

STONE WALLS

'One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.'
—Oscar Wilde

After five decades of knitting, I still love the traditions of the craft—the patterns, the styles, the techniques and the history. But during that time I have designed rather untraditional items as well, knitting for boutiques and, as founder of the art collective Spectrum 7, exhibiting my wearable art in galleries.

Wearable Art

Philippa Olsen

The jumper on this page was part of a Spectrum 7 exhibit called *Barossa and Beyond*.

South Australia's Barossa Valley was settled in 1840 by mainly German migrants. It is quite picturesque, having retained much of its German character, and I was living there when I made this sleeveless jumper.

It is a painting to wear on your back. I like my work to say something about the person who is wearing it or the environment in which we live, and sometimes both. This piece's colours and textures reference the Barossa, its light and shade, and its stone walls with their lichens and mosses. All the colours of the soil and rocks, the stone's striations, and the changes wrought by weathering are reflected in this jumper.

The yarns used in this sleeveless pullover are commercially spun Australian 5 ply wool.

Because commercial yarns are available only in a small collection of fashion colours each season, however, it is



impossible to buy all the colours at once. So to get variety into my palette, I gather and collect yarn over many years. I am quite a magpie! I build up the collection from small scraps of leftover yarn—some as small as a few metres—from odd balls, end-of-season clearance sales and from friends paring down their stash. Sometimes I dye the yarn if I cannot find the shade I want. It can take years to accumulate shades. I have stored unusual yarn for up to 15 years so that I have a particular shade available.

When I begin to design a new piece, I start tossing different colours into a laundry basket. Over a period of days, or sometimes even weeks, I take some out and put others in until I am satisfied with the palette. Meanwhile, I work on fair isle or intarsia graphs, sizing of the garment, tension and pattern swatches. I do not plan where each colour will be knitted in the design; I make that choice as I see the 'painting' develop.

This jumper is machine-knitted and hand-finished, with some hand-embroidery which has been used like a few extra brush strokes. Hand knitting and machine knitting are two different tools of the trade. The knitting machine is a useful and expedient tool that allows me to produce a greater volume of work. I would also choose the machine for fair isle designs because it saves me counting and lets me concentrate on colour alone.

Hand knitting, however, is a relaxing, meditative pursuit. I love its rhythm and the feeling of the yarn in my hands. It allows me to 'moodle', to think, mull over and develop ideas, doodle with texture and colour, to observe and compare—it gives me creative time in my head and food for the soul! And at the end of these processes comes the satisfaction of having created a unique garment with its own story to tell.

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