Stranded Knitting Lesson
by Arenda Holladay

As with all articles in the Stitch Anatomy Series, the lesson discusses the stitch pattern in detail, any potential problems in working it and tips for improving the appearance. For those interested, a pattern for a pillow using the stitch pattern follows. The pattern outlines the steps involved in designing with the stitch pattern. Also included is information for anyone who wants to try designing a similar pillow on their own using different yarns, a different pillow size or a variation of the pattern.

ABOUT STRANDED KNITTING
Stranded or Jacquard knitting is a colorwork technique where two colors are used in one row. The color not being used is carried behind the work until it is needed. These are called floats. Sometimes stranded knitting is referred to as “Fair Isle,” “Norwegian,” or some name identifying a geographic area. These names refer to areas where a specific tradition of stranded knitting was developed. Each tradition has its own rules and characteristics which make it unique. For example, Fair Isle patterns have peeries and Norwegian patterns have “lice.” Since the fabric has a double thickness it is not surprising that this technique flourished in colder climates. The lesson will not discuss the history of stranded knitting or their cultural significance. An article on Fair Isle traditions can be found on page 10 and the bibliography following this article lists books that delve into history and culture.

Since the stitch pattern used for stranded knitting is Stockinette, the knitting itself is not difficult but the process can be challenging. The richness and complexity of the final project can make
dealing with multiple balls of yarns and the extra finishing worth while. Most knitters have learned that not all projects are fun but the final product can make the extra work worthwhile.

Selecting yarns, colors, working with charts and managing the tension of the floats are the primary issues. This article will discuss very practical issues for working with stranded knitting.

Choosing Appropriate Yarn
As with any project, it is important to select appropriate yarn. This technique produces a very heavy fabric. If you look at traditional patterns using this technique, the specified gauge generally ranges from 27 to 32 stitches over 4 inches. Although cotton could be substituted for wool, the resulting garment would be quite heavy. If you do not plan to dye your own wool, you also want to select a yarn which has a full range of colors. Not surprisingly, yarn from locations where stranded knitting is part of the tradition may be the place to start. Jamieson of the Shetlands, Dale of Norway, Rauma Finullgarn, and Hifa have yarns in the right weight with full ranges of color. Not all yarn stores carry these brands so a bit of internet research might be necessary. More readily available is Knitpicks Palette yarn which is a fingering weight yarn and comes in many colors.

If you plan to substitute another yarn for a pattern or if you are designing a garment, buy only one skein of each color and knit a swatch. It will tell you more than any list of acceptable/non-acceptable fibers. For example, the yarn used for the sample pillow is 26% mohair which somewhat softens the design motifs but the overall effect for the pillow is pleasing. A stranded sweater made of this same fiber would be almost unwearable except on a very cold day. The Fair Isle vest on page 20 shows the same design done in a smooth yarn and different colors.

Colors
Color is another factor you must consider when working stranded designs. Color theory is beyond the scope of this article but the stitch patterns will not be visible if there is not enough contrast between the colors. If you plan to substitute colors, buy only one skein of each color and work swatches first. Don’t be afraid to experiment. You may find that the color combinations do not work or you may discover combinations you would never have considered. The Bibliography provides a reference for color theory.

The degree of difficulty in stranded work is determined by the number of colors used in the design. The more colors, the more difficult the project will be. Although the vast majority of stranded patterns only use two colors per row, the other colors are carried up the side meaning that you may be working with four or five balls of yarn at the same time. Inevitably the yarn gets tangled.

The number of colors also makes finishing more trying. All of the yarn tails need to be woven in. In some designs it may be more practical to cut the yarn rather than carry it, which creates even more yarn tails.

Charts
All stranded patterns provide charts. Most stranded patterns are geometric designs repeated over and over across a row. For that reason, the charts generally show just the number of stitches it takes to repeat the pattern across the row. If you are working in the round, the chart is read from right to left and repeated over and over until the row is complete. If you are working flat, the chart for RS rows is read from right to left, but for WS rows the chart is read from left to right.

Some patterns will provide charts for each design. It is up to the knitter to interpret and integrate the charts. Other charts will show the entire design. The chart for the pillow is of this type.

Working from Charts
A portion of a chart is above. To work this chart, you would knit the first stitch with the pale blue yarn. If this is the first time this yarn is used, you should leave a yarn tail of at least 6". Do not tie a knot. The next stitch is knit with the white yarn. The blue yarn is then picked up again and loosely stranded behind the white stitch just knit. (Stranding is discussed in more detail later.) This procedure is repeated for the round. On the next round the dark blue yarn is added. It is not necessary to cut the light blue yarn as it will be used again on the following round.

Circular vs. Flat
It is far easier to work stranded patterns in the round. Most knitters find forming the knit stitch easier than the purl stitch, plus charts are easier to read while working in the round. This is the reason most of traditional stranded garments are worked completely in the round and the fabric is cut later for the sleeves or to create a cardigan. One problem with circular knitting is the jogs that occur at the beginning and end of the rounds. The article on page 60 discusses circular knitting. Most patterns do not address the issue of jogs since they are generally placed at the side of the garment.

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Stranded designs can also be worked flat. The key disadvantage is that wrong side rows must be purled and the charts must be read in the opposite direction. Add this to the complications of working with multiple balls of yarn and the challenge grows. It is also necessary to twist the yarns when using a new color at the beginning of a row or there will be a hole. Despite the difficulties, some knitters prefer to knit stranded patterns flat and seam the pieces. The seams are less bulky than steeks. Many who do knit stranded designs learn to knit backwards. This is a useful technique, particularly for short rows and entrelac where you do not turn the work but knit backwards. If you are interested in this technique, typing “Knitting Backwards” into your search engine will bring up numerous videos demonstrating the techniques.

**Holding the Yarn**

Since you are using two different colors for each row, you must learn to manage the yarn strands. You have three basic choices. You can drop one strand and pick up the other every time you change colors. It doesn’t matter if you hold the yarn in your left or right hand. The problem with this method is that it is very time consuming and the yarn has a tendency to get tangled. Some knitters find it easier to keep one strand over their index finger and the other strand over the middle finger. Again, you can use either hand. Perhaps the best way is to hold one strand in your right hand and the other in your left hand. The yarn tangles less using this method but it does require learning a new way to knit. If you normally hold your yarn in your right hand, hold the color with the most stitches in the row with this hand. It can take some practice but it is ultimately worth the time it takes to master it.

For each row determine which color will be the “dominant” color and keep the floats in the other color. This improves the tension on the RS. Compare the floats in illustration 2 to those in illustration 3.

**Tension**

The biggest problem with stranded knitting is maintaining even tension. The goal is that all of the stitches are the same size. If you strand the yarn too tightly across the back it makes the next stitch too small and it disappears into the work. These strands are called floats. Illustrations 1 and 2 show a swatch where this has occurred. Do not pull the yarn while stranding. Before knitting the first stitch with the new color, stretch the stitches on the needle to their full width. Then strand the yarn over these stitches. Also before going on to a new round or row, look at your work and inspect it for small stitches. If you see any you can get a tapestry needle and manipulate the yarn from the floats to make the stitches larger. Illustration 3 shows the WS of the pillow and the floats.

It is critical that you continue to measure the fabric as you work so that you do not change tension.

**Floats**

One problem with the floats is that they can be easily snagged if they are too long. Most traditional stranded patterns do not have a float any longer than five stitches for this reason. Some contemporary designs do not follow this general rule. Examine the charts before committing to a pattern and consider its practicality. Keep this in mind if you plan to design a stranded pattern. For example, you would not want long floats in a sleeve or in a mitten.

If you encounter a design with long floats you can always “catch” or “trap” the float. This means that instead of keeping the unused
yarn out of the way, you intentionally catch it or trap it behind the working yarn. Illustration 4 shows floats of this type.

Keep in mind if you use this technique it can change the texture of the RS of the work and the trapped yarn can show through to the front. This technique is the basis of Meg Swansen's new book Armenian Knitting. For traditional stranded designs, trapping the yarn isn't necessary. How you trap the floats depends on how you hold the strands. The bibliography provides a reference for these techniques.

[Image of Illustration 4]

It has already been mentioned that one color should be the dominant color. It really doesn't matter which color it is as long as you are consistent. This is easier to manage if you learn to use both hands to hold the strands.

Carrying Strands Up the Work
It is not necessary to cut the yarn at the end of a round if it is not used in the next round. There is not a rule for how many rows you can carry the yarn up the work. This is a judgement call. If the piece is going to be worn, you would not want to carry the strands up for more than a few rows. For the pillow in this lesson, that isn't a concern. When you carry the yarn up the work do not pull it too tight or it will pucker the work.

Weaving in Ends
One of the least pleasant aspects of stranded knitting is dealing with the many yarn tails. There are many different ways to weave in yarn tails. Whichever method you choose, you should be sure they cannot pull free or work their way to the RS. They should not be visible if the piece is stretched. The duplicate stitch method of weaving in yarn tails is more time consuming but it does avoid all of these problems. The Reference Section provides a source for this technique.

Gauge
Depending on how tightly you strand, the gauge for stranded patterns can be very different from regular Stockinette gauge. It is essential that you work a stranded gauge rather than just a Stockinette gauge in one color. It is also a good idea to work the gauge swatch in the round if that is how you will knit the project. There can be a significant difference.

FAIR ISLE PILLOW LESSON
The pattern in this lesson is for a 14" pillow with a stranded pattern which incorporates traditional Fair Isle motifs. However, the yarn selected for the project is not traditionally used for stranded work. It is a heavier weight yarn and fuzzy, but this adds to the texture for a pillow. In this lesson there will be an explanation of each step preceding the pattern section. Pattern instructions will follow.

Knitting a pillow is different than knitting a sweater. For one thing, the pillow will last longer if its finished fabric is denser. When you are knitting a sweater, drape of the fabric is an important consideration. A sweater knit with a significantly smaller gauge than the recommended gauge will not drape properly but a stiff fabric will work well for a pillow. Think of it as the difference between upholstery fabric and fabric used to sew a dress.

Pattern Information
This section provides general information you need to work the pattern.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fair Isle Pillow</th>
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<td>by Arenda Holladay</td>
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| Yarn Symbol: Light (3) |
| Level of Experience: Intermediate |

| Finished Measurements: |
| Front Width: 14" |
| Front Length: 14" |

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Materials:
Rowan KID CLASSIC (1.76oz/50g, 153yds/140m, 70% Lambswool, 26% Kid Mohair, 4% Nylon):
2 skeins #828 Feather (A), 1 skein each #822 Glacier (B), #856 Tattoo #856 (C) & #853 Spruce (D)
Size 5 (3.75mm) 24" (60MM) circular needles or size needed to obtain correct gauge
Tapestry needle
Stitch markers
14" x 14" pillow form

Gauge:
In stranded pattern, 22 sts & 28 rows = 4"/10 cm.
To save time, take time to check gauge.

Preparation – Measuring Gauge
The most important part of the general pattern information is the description of the expected gauge. Before beginning it is necessary to knit a gauge swatch even if you are using the recommended yarn. Since this is a pillow, the recommended gauge on the yarn label is too loose. The fabric needs to be denser both for durability and so that the pillow form does not show through. The size 8 or 9 needles recommended on the yarn label are too large. This pattern recommends using size 5 needles.

It is a good idea to work the gauge swatch in the round. This will require working at least two multiples of the Fair Isle chart. You may want to use DPNs if you are not familiar with the Magic Loop technique. Work at least 30 rounds of the pattern. Illustration 5 shows the gauge swatch for this project. If you wish you can knit the swatch flat but keep in mind that there might be a slight difference in the gauge. Block the swatch and measure the width to an eighth of an inch and note the decimal measurement on the worksheet that follows.

Gauge Worksheet
|--------|-------------|----------|------------|----------|

Number of Stitches: Don't include the selvedge stitches. Divide the number of stitches by the width. This gives you the number of stitches per inch. Do not round off the number.

Number of Stitches Per Inch: Multiply the number of stitches by 4. Round this number up or down.

Number of Stitches in 4": Repeat this procedure to determine the row gauge.

|---------|-------------|----------|------------|----------|

Number of Rows: Don't include the cast on or bind off edge. Divide the number of rows by the length. This gives you the number of rows per inch. Do not round off the number.

Number of Rows Per Inch: Multiply the number of rows by 4. Round this number up or down.

Number of Rows in 4": If you are getting fewer stitches than the recommended gauge, try using a smaller needle size. If you are getting more stitches than the recommended gauge, try using a larger needle size.

Decisions – Pillow Back
Before proceeding, it is necessary to make some decisions about the pillow back. In the sample pillow, the Fair Isle pattern does not continue on the back but each color of the row alternates in a checkerboard pattern (see illustration 6). Since the pillow is knit in the round, it is necessary to use both colors for the whole round so that both colors are returned to the beginning of the round.

Illustration 5
Illustration 6
If you look at the Fair Isle chart, notice that rounds 5, 6, 16, 17, 22, 23, 28, 29, 43, 44, 49 and 50 are one color. This means that when you get to the pillow back you will not have a second color of yarn to continue the checkerboard pattern. If you want the pattern, add another color when you get to the back. Keep in mind this will increase the number of yarn tails you have to weave in. If you would rather not continue the checkerboard pattern, just work those rounds in Color A.

**Pillow**
The pillow is worked in the round. The 16-stitch Fair Isle chart is worked five times across the front. In the last repeat the 16th stitch is omitted so that the design is symmetrical. Two repeats of the 50-row chart are worked. The 2-stitch Checkerboard chart is worked across the back with two plain stitches on either side as a border to separate the back from the front. On the first row, you will place markers around the 2 border stitches on either side of the pillow front (79 sts). Once you have worked a few rounds you might find you no longer need the markers.

When working the stranded patterns, remember not to pull the strands tightly. Before knitting the first stitch in the new color, stretch the stitches to their full extent and then strand the yarn and knit the stitch. Determine which color you want on top. Since Color A is the background color, you might want to keep it on top. If you look at illustration 3, you can see that the white strands are on top.

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**Pillow Front**
With Color A, CO 160 sts. Join into a rnd being careful not to twist sts.
Rnd 1: PM, k2, pm, k79, pm, k2, pm, k77. Work 2 more rnds.

**Beg Stranded Pattern (see chart at right)**
Rnd 1: With Color A, k2, work row 1 of Fair Isle chart 5 times. On final rep, work only the first 15 sts of Fair Isle chart. Using Color A, k2. Work row 1 of Checkerboard chart until the first marker.
Cont to follow charts, working the 50 sts of the Fair Isle chart twice. For Rows 10 and 12 you may want to work the border sts in Color B since Color A is not used on those rows. If you do not wish to maintain the Checkerboard Pat for rnds 5, 6, 16, 17, 22, 23, 28, 29, 43, 44, 49 and 50, work them in Color A. Work 2 rnds in Color A. BO.

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**Finishing the Pillow**
It really isn't necessary to block the pillow top as it will be stretched over the pillow form. If you block the top, you run the risk of stretching it out too much so that it does not fit the pillow form. All of the yarn tails must be woven in before the pillow is complete. Turn the pillow inside out and use the duplicate stitch method to weave in the yarn tails. The Reference Section provides a source for this technique.

Since it was worked in the round, there are no side seams. Use the invisible horizontal seam technique (see illustration 7) to seam the cast on and bind off edges. The Reference Section provides sources for these seaming techniques.
**Finishing**

Fold the pillow in half so that the front is on top. Sew the cast on edges tog. Put the pillow form in the pillow. Sew the BO edges tog. Secure the end and thread the yarn tail to the inside and then pull to the outside (see illustration 8). Clip the yarn tail.

**Modifying the Pattern for a Different Sized Pillow or Yarn**

It is easy to modify this pattern for a larger pillow by following simple steps:

1. Determine the number of stitches in your gauge.
2. Multiply the number of stitches per inch by the size of the pillow to find the total number of stitches needed for the pillow.
3. The multiple for this pattern is 16. Divide the total number of stitches needed for the pillow by the number of stitches in the pattern multiple (16) to find the number of multiples for the pillow.
4. Determine the number of stitches left over and decide whether to add another multiple. If adding another multiple would make the pillow too large, consider adding stitches for a border.

**Designing Your Own Pillow**

Stranded designs involve more work than most projects. If you are going to design your own pillow, the best place to start is by looking at examples of stranded designs. The bibliography provides a list of books which deal with traditional patterns. All of these provide charts. Many stitch dictionaries also include some charts for stranded designs. The bibliography includes two.

Graph paper and colored pencils or a computer program that can generate colored charts are essential tools. You can experiment with the designs and color choices. The next step is to locate yarns in the weight and colors you like. Knit several swatches. Again, don't be afraid to experiment. Once you have a swatch with the colors you like you can move on to the next step which is outlined above.

**Conclusion**

Stranded designs are more work than other types of stitch patterns. Since they are knit in Stockinette Stitch the actual knitting is quite easy but managing the balls of yarns, maintaining even tension with the floats, and dealing with the yarn tails during finishing make stranded knitting very challenging. However, the finished products can make all of the work worthwhile.

**Bibliography**

This is by no means a complete listing of every book on traditional stranded patterns but it is a good place to start.

**Fair Isle Traditions:**


**Swedish Traditions:**


**Scandinavian Traditions:**


**Latvian Traditions:**


**Stitch Dictionaries:**


**Color Theory:**


**Trapping Floats:**