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Innovation in Estonian heritage-based knitting

The case of embroidered gloves

ABSTRACT

Innovation is an intentionally introduced significant and positive change to an existent practice. In crafts, innovation is challenging because, by nature, crafts are based on traditions and collective knowledge; they involve practising something the way it has always been practiced. If anything changes, it is copied rapidly by other craftspeople. In this article, I explain innovation in traditional glove-knitting through the concept of transformation of the tradition, and I analyse the case using a method called technique-concept-utility-structure-material (TCUSM), which was introduced by Adhi Nugraha in 2010. According to this method, one must know the tradition thoroughly in order to make conscious and justifiable changes to it. One must compare and explain what is traditional and what is new in one's products. I combine this method with an artistic autoethnographic approach. Within my personal practice, the most significant change to the original involves combining and borrowing aesthetic elements from other traditional textiles or developing my own combinations of patterns and colours. First, I give a short overview of the history of embroidered gloves in Estonia, then demonstrate, with the help of explanations and photographs, contemporary gloves, made by me.

Keywords:

tradition, innovation, gloves, knitting, embroidery.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation is an intentionally constructed positive change, and it is primarily used in the context of business thinking. The Estonian Statistics website defines it as follows:

Innovation refers to the launch of a new or significantly improved product or service or the introduction of a new business process. The aim of innovation is to create value and gain a competitive advantage, which will benefit the enterprise's development and increase productivity, simultaneously contributing to economic growth. (<https://www.stat.ee>)

There is a tendency to think of innovation as rapid change, as opposed to natural changes that occur over a long period of time. Innovation can be of different types – product, process or mindset – and it is important to bear in mind that it is not a binary phenomenon, for it occurs in degrees (Kahn, 2018, p. 454). Today, radical and time-bound innovation is mainly managed and financed by venture funds, companies or investors, who also set conditions that, in their view, lead to the fulfilment of their specific goals. However, in the field of crafts, it is difficult to label changes as 'innovations' because the nature of craft itself does not support it; the dynamics of change here are slow and incremental. Crafts are based on traditions and collective knowledge; age-old practices are preserved and carried forward because they are believed to be highly convenient, efficient and beautiful. Any change within a craft first tends to occur in the practice of an individual craftsperson, and then the result may be copied by other craftspeople.

Interestingly, the concept of intentional innovation – knowing how to deal with challenges and lead changes consciously (see also Juliani 2017) – is valuable in the field of traditional crafts because crafts are a source of livelihood or additional income that is subject to market logic. Thus, it is necessary to pursue continuous product development for the sake of novelty and sales efficiency. As a craft micro-entrepreneur, I do not have direct experience with large-scale innovation, but I am still regularly engaged in refining my own products, which also helps keep my artistic self in good shape.

In this article, I aim to examine small-scale gradual innovation, specifically how it manifests itself in my personal contemporary knitting of heritage-style gloves, which I have been practising for the last 20 years. By heritage, I refer to the Estonian ethnographic artefacts of the 19th and early 20th centuries, which have been preserved in museums and originally belonged to the Estonian peasantry. (Historically, several other nationalities lived in our country, mostly Germans, who formed the nobility here.) For the last 10–15 years, I have been engaged in the practice-based research of heritage Estonian mittens and gloves, and I have published books on it, which have also been translated into English (Jõeste & Ehin, 2012; Pink, Reimann, & Jõeste, 2016; Jõeste, 2022; see also Pink, 2018). I have focused mainly on the technical aspects: how and from which materials mittens/gloves were knitted, what different types were available, how they changed over time, and cultural aspects (customs, etc.) and aesthetics (colours, patterns). Creative application of heritage styles is the underlying principle of my craft and business model. In addition to research and exhibition activities, I have engaged in small-scale serial production: between 2013 and 2015, I hired the services of as many as five to six permanent knitters trained by myself, whom I supplied with yarns and instructions. Thus, I have experience in conceptualising craft-making as a culturally and economically sustainable activity, which can, theoretically, help an individual earn a satisfactory income through the sale of products bearing a national identity that are attractive to buyers. (I use the word 'theoretical' as I have mainly worked as a university lecturer since 2008.) I have experimented with different knitting techniques, from stranded colourwork to inlay and have experience selling in stores, online and privately. That is how I have identified the product category with the greatest sales potential – hand-knitted and embroidered gloves, which are no longer made in Estonia at a quality similar to mine, i.e. luxury handicraft. (There are machine-knitted gloves embroidered with coarser threads; for example, Murese talu is the most famous: <https://murese.ee/tikitud-kindad>.) Currently, my business and product development are paused because I'm writing the fourth part of the 'Estonian knitting' series; I only knit for private individual orders.

An overview of my innovation attempts can be found in the second half of this article. For analysing my experiments, I use a method called technique-concept-utility-structure-material (TCUSM), based on an artistic autoethnographic approach. The TCUSM tool was proposed by Adhi Nugraha for conceptualising culturally, environmentally and economically sustainable product development (2010). According to this method, one must thoroughly understand the historical tradition of a craft to make articulated and transparent changes to similar contemporary products, or if one does not make the

changes, then to justify them. Then one must clearly communicate to the client that the resulting product is a cultural hybrid or a transformation of the tradition.

THE TRADITION

Before describing the embroidered gloves of the Estonian peasantry from the 19th century, both technically and aesthetically, I turn to the past to discuss the context in which the craft evolved. Estonian peasants were officially freed from serfdom in 1816, but the slavery of working for the manor, or indentured servitude, continued until 1868. In the middle of the 19th century, owing to certain laws, it became possible for those living in rural regions to buy farms (Viires, 2008, p. 44, 46). At the time, Estonians accounted for 99.4% of those living in the countryside and only 30% of those living in the cities. However, by the end of the century, 67% of the city dwellers were Estonians, who had moved mainly for better living and work conditions during industrialisation (Eesti Entsüklopeedia, 2023). This is one of the reasons why old textile heritage did not develop in the city, which was predominantly populated by Germans. Instead, innovative ideas spread to the rural people, who mostly handmade the textiles themselves, through German manors located in the countryside, where many craftspeople and manor servants of other nationalities worked, such as Finns and Swedes (Viires, 2008, p. 42).

Abundant ethnographic material, in contrast to the minimal archaeological findings, is available on handmade garments because at the end of the 19th century, during the first wave of national identity construction, initial collectors of material culture started visiting peasants. In this way, the Estonian National Museum (ENM), founded in 1909, has approximately 2,000 mittens/gloves or fragments from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of these are mittens and about a third are gloves, and the items have diverse knitting techniques. The most common are stranded colourwork, travelling stitches, lace patterns, inlay (figures 1–4) and, to a small extent, embroidery on readymade gloves, of which only 10 pairs have been collected (9 are in ENM and one pair in the Muhu Museum). For more about the history, customs, colours, patterns and specific knitting instructions of Estonian knitting, see the trilogy "Estonian knitting 1–3".



FIGURES 1–4. (Left to right): 1. Mitten in stranded colourwork from Põltsamaa ERM 4584. 2. Lace-patterned glove from Paistu ERM 9219:5. 3. Glove knitted with travelling stitches from Muhu island ERM 18810. 4. Glove knitted with inlay motifs from Helme ERM 3528. (All photos are from Estonian National Museum, except if otherwise mentioned).

In Norway, a comprehensive overview of embroidered gloves has been published by Heidi Fossnes (2009). In Sweden, the digital museum of Nordiska Museet has a number of embroidered mittens and gloves with the Swedish keyword *vantar*. In Finland, embroidery on gloves (within their digital museum) is seen to a lesser extent. There is no data from Latvia because they have not published similar literature

in English, and they do not have an online museum portal, like Estonia does (muis.ee). The same is true of Russia.

Since there is no published material on Estonian embroidered gloves in English, I provide a short introduction here. All the embroidered gloves were made of 2-ply woollen yarn. The gloves were first knitted rather tightly by hand and then embroidered with (fine) woollen stitches (stem, chain, cross, herring bone, etc.) that could be easily sewn on the surface of the glove as a three-dimensional object, without having to insert the needle inside the glove. Gloves were sometimes embroidered to mimic inlay patterns, but I do not consider those as embroidered gloves as they probably indicate the maker's unfamiliarity with the inlay technique. Ten pairs of embroidered gloves under my examination (I documented those in the research room of the ENM) were made between 1842 and approximately 1920. They belong to diverse regions: three from Setomaa, which is at the edge of southeast Estonia, three from Muhu island and the remaining four from other parts of southern Estonia. No similar gloves were obtained from other Estonian islands or coastal areas, so one can rule out the idea that embroidered gloves were borrowed from local Swedes (they did not have such items). It is more likely that the creative practice arose locally. The gloves obtained from places in southern Estonia are the oldest as the embroidered motifs are reminiscent of a time when such patterns were embroidered on other items, such as headdresses or aprons. Specifically, the embroidery on the gloves from Kolga-Jaani (figure 5) shows strong similarities with medieval motifs, which can be found on various textiles. On Seto's embroidered gloves, from the end of the 19th century, we find cross stitch (figure 6) and free-hand embroidery (figure 7). One glove features a central motif, knitted using the intarsia technique, with rhombuses embroidered around it in chain stitches (figure 8). All of them are clearly in traditional Seto colours (Jöeste, Sarv 2023, p. 427), which confirms that they were made there. Three pairs have been collected from Muhu island, belonging to the beginning of the 20th century (figure 9), and parallels can be drawn between these pairs and the local embroidery tradition, which is the most famous of all Estonian embroidery styles – flower embroidery. Wedding blankets, as well as stockings and cardigans, carried floral embroidery (Kabur, *et al.*, 2011). One of the gloves, which is the oldest in the ENM collection, features beads and also a motif of an older geometric type (figure 10).



FIGURES 5–10. 5. Kolga-Jaani ERM 14160. 6. Petseri ERM 6447. 7. Obinitsa ERM A 509:3093. 8. Petseri ERM A 231:16. 9. Muhu ERM A 580:13. 10. Rõuge ERM 4565.

THE INNOVATION

In this section, I discuss a heritage-based creative application using the technique-concept-utility-structure-material (TCUSM) tool (Nugraha, 2010) combined with artistic autoethnography, which helps artists understand, contextualise, and communicate their artistic experiences (Bartleet, 2021). Autoethnography serves as the contextualising lens for research in arts and allied fields, including crafts, and it embraces non-linearity and improvisation (Bartleet, 2021, pp. 137–139). It generally refers to a reflexive method towards describing and explaining various phenomena, first analysed at an individual subjective level, and then generalised academically into a broader cultural context. The researcher is both the subject and the object of observation (Ehn, 2011). The TCUSM tool also provides concrete

guidance, which helps articulate the changes made to traditional design production for cultural sustainability. With regard to sustainability, Nugraha (2010, p. 20) states that ‘As long as some fundamental components of tradition – or at least one of them – are continuously transformed in the production of new objects, a part of our tradition will be kept alive and be sustainable.’ Broadly, sustainability is understood as a political, economic, environmental, social and/or spiritual philosophy that makes a certain practice reasonable and repeatable because the necessary resources are available and remain available for the needs of future generations (Väänänen & Pöllänen, 2020, pp. 265–266). In the TCUSM method, each heritage-based product can be broken down into separate elements and then examined in terms of what has or has not changed in the new item compared to the traditional one and why. Changes can be made to production methods (i.e. technically, conceptually/spiritually, functionally) (Nugraha used the word ‘utility’), structure (aesthetics, cut, size, patterns, etc.) or material. If one studies both the original traditional object and their current contexts and resources thoroughly, it is easy to make a reasoned choice about the elements to take or leave and how to innovate. It is important to articulate these choices (Nugraha, 2010, p. 24–28).

Innovations to traditional glove knitting can be aesthetic, material, technique-based or function-based. At a conceptual level, today, perceptions have changed drastically; we no longer express the same beliefs, values and customs through objects that we did centuries ago. However, heritage-style production may act as carriers of national (politically constructed) identity. In my own case, I tend not to communicate the original intangible aspects, like beliefs, as these are no longer relevant in the contemporary context. For example, red is no longer a colour that protects from the evil eye (I am not in favour of using it, in order to sell my gloves better). I prefer to leave the direct functional aspects (utility) to the consumers. Modern gloves are not only meant for occasions like going to the church or participating in festivities. The gloves I knit are practical artefacts, meant to be worn daily with modern clothing. Everything else, in the material sense, depends on the goal. If the goal is to operate within the traditionally established field of knitting, then I cannot run the risk of changing all the elements of the craft. Doing so will ruin the traditional character of the craft, which is also something that the consumers recognise.

Presented below is a photo series of my embroidered gloves and an autoethnographic analysis of their sources of inspiration. I consider the Estonian textile heritage as a *resource warehouse*, from which I, as a modern person, choose elements that resonate with today’s culture (Honko, 1998). Owing to my special education in heritage-based textiles and long-term practice, I am possibly better equipped to undertake this because of my, what can be termed as, sensitivity to tradition. For example, I do not combine elements from different regions and times. I also prefer to make single copies or small series, because even in original folk art, no two handmade objects are exactly alike. Even though craft traditions prescribe some formal rules, craftspersons can still be unique in terms of the details.



FIGURES 11–14. Embroidered gloves (photos by the author) inspired by women’s traditional headgear from Saaremaa island, which can be seen in figures 13 and 14: ERM 16505 and ERM A 316:81.



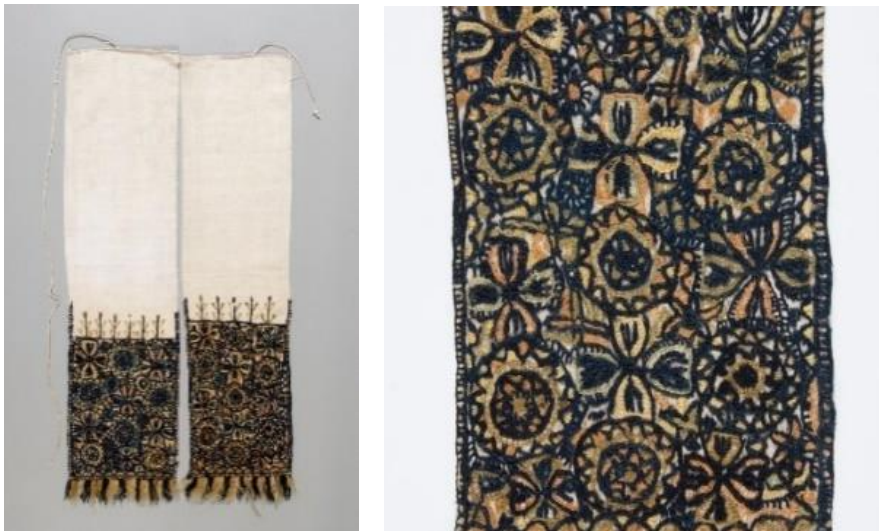
FIGURES 15–17. Embroidered gloves inspired by a handkerchief with medieval style patterns from Helme, ERM 3603.



FIGURES 18–21. Contemporary embroidered gloves inspired by the headdresses from the Mulgi area, ERM 9216 4 and VM VM 351 E12 (photo by Viljandi Museum).



FIGURES 22–24. Embroidered gloves inspired by the medieval style embroidery on hip aprons obtained from the Mulgi area. Motifs have not been replicated but embroidered with the different colours and thinner, chemically dyed yarns. This type of embroidery is popular in Estonia and seen on varied products that bear national identity. I, too, have used it frequently because it lends itself to free-hand embroidery and thus does not call for too much accuracy.



FIGURES 25–26. Hip apron from Halliste, ERM 8108.



FIGURE 28. Machine-knitted gloves. I experimented with machine-knitted gloves, subjecting them to a heavy wash. The idea had its merits because the making process could be considerably shortened by a competent machine-knitter. The embroidery itself was simpler: only contours were embroidered, a piece of silk tie and a decorative tin element (seen in archaeological textiles) were added, and some metal beads were sewn on the wrist area for a more elegant and sophisticated product. However, I would never do it again because the relatively loosely machine-knitted gloves, although felted, tended to wear out much faster (within one season) than the tightly hand-knitted gloves. Thus, embroidering them was not worth the effort. Estonian handknitting is quite tight, but it makes the items last longer.



FIGURES 29–30. Cross stitched gloves (photo by Indrek Anteploon) and old mitten from Halliste, ERM 1810. These demonstrate how I have taken a traditional knitted pattern and *translated* it into a cross-stitch ornament.

RESULTS

I have hand-knitted all the gloves shown here – except one which was machine-knitted – from woollen 8/2 yarn on 1.25 or 1.5 mm needles with 76–88 stitches per round. The approximate time for making a pair of gloves, knitting and embroidering included, was between 40 and 50 hours. I have not copied any of the original embroidered gloves; instead, I have chosen colours and patterns according to my own tastes, mainly from other 19th century embroidered heritage textiles of Estonia. My favourite sources of inspiration have been headpieces because of their highly decorative patterns. I have either left the colours the same, compared to the originals, or improvised spontaneously. Among the embroidered motifs, I have deliberately selected those that are easy to embroider on gloves as three-dimensional objects. In most cases, I have simplified the patterns to quicken the process and make the final price of the gloves more affordable. Still, the end products are more expensive than those obtained from common knitting techniques, because of the exclusivity. The cross-stitch motif on figure 29 was the most time-consuming because it was not a free-hand pattern. I had to follow the arrangement of the knitted loops in the background like the plain-woven fabrics, by counting the weft and warp threads. Thus, it was taxing on the eyes. From the viewpoint of sales, this method does not seem promising initially; however, if a whole series of such gloves, decorated with cross stitches, are made and sold as luxury products with targeted marketing methods, the consumer demand and the price point will become apparent. I cannot use machine-knitted glove blanks because a knit structure that is fine, dense and as durable as in hand-knitted gloves is not available in the current Estonian knitwear design market. Hand-led domestic machines are designed to knit more sparsely, and industrial more capable machines do not meet my requirements of making the small series, i.e. the industry is not willing to maintain micro-size orders. In the future, I am willing to try an appliqué technique with second-hand silk fabrics, which will allow me to cover larger areas, and the luxurious nature of silk will ensure decorativeness. If I complement these with glass beads and sequins, the result can be a pattern that is completed faster, compared to the slower hand-embroidery.

CONCLUSION

Given the concepts explored here – tradition, innovation, handknitting and embroidery – from an artistic autoethnographic lens and with the help of the TCUSM tool, the main conclusion is that Estonian gloves, their techniques, materials, colours and patterns are conceptually strong bearers of cultural continuity/sustainability and ethnic identity. There is no need to innovate/transform them radically. Even if the process of making them is slow, I believe that the familiar, traditional visual elements are worth preserving, so that the native culture remains vibrant and rich. With regard to embroidered gloves, innumerable decorative choices are available for embroidery because there are thousands of headgears, aprons, shirts, etc. in museum collections. Thus, it can be safely said that the resource warehouse is like a bottomless well, where everyone can find their unique sources of inspiration that can either be preserved or modified. In my career, I have tried different approaches, from copy-making to knitting single pairs of original designs. Although large-scale hand-making is not economically sustainable, it is culturally justified, and the products can be successfully sold with the right marketing strategy. Wool continues to be the best and most sustainable material for the Nordic climate. In this way, it is possible to make a micro contribution to its local valorisation. One type of innovation that can definitely be pursued by knowing the tradition thoroughly is the personalising of decorative aspects, like patterns and colours, and moving away from blind copying. The reusability of heritage textile elements in new cultural circumstances is an inexhaustible source of inspiration for every nation.

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