These beautiful flowers are among the knitted items in the Montze Stanley knitting collection.

A knitting legacy

Linda Newington opens up the doors to the University of Southampton’s fascinating Knitting Collections.
Our fascination with the knitwear of the past seems to know no bounds – the classic, elegant knit of yesteryear continue to inspire and influence designers and knitters alike. Working to collect, preserve and share these patterns is the University of Southampton Library, whose Knitting Collections contain more than 12,000 patterns from the early 20th century to the present day. The Library holds the resources of three renowned figures in the history of knitting, but in areas such as social history, gender studies and anthropology.

**The Beautiful and everyday**

Writer and designer Montse Stanley is known for her book The Knitter’s Handbook, a comprehensive guide to the patterns and techniques of handknitting that has guided many knitters and knitters alike. Working to collect, preserve and share these patterns is the University of Southampton Library, whose Knitting Collections contain more than 12,000 patterns from the early 20th century to the present day. The Library holds the resources of three renowned figures in the history of knitting, but in areas such as social history, gender studies and anthropology.

**Victorian Visions**

Richard Haft, familiar to many as the ‘Knitting Bishop’, generously donated his Library to the University in recognition of his long-standing knitting friendship with Montse Stanley. A particular feature of his Library is the Victorian knitting books, first printed for wider distribution back in the 1830s. These ground-breaking books represent a translation of a handicraft practise into written and visual form, and may be seen as a precursor of the contemporary knitting patterns and pattern books familiar to us today. From these Victorian books patterns he knitted a group of four-piece jugs using the patterns which appear in his classic book A History of Handknitting (Barstow, 1987).

His collection also includes several thousand knitting patterns with an emphasis on menswear. It is fascinating to look through the collection and spot the influence of popular culture over the decades – from the Liverpool Look of the Beatles to Starsky and Hutch – and even a few celebrity faces, such as a young Billy Connolly in a book entitled Celebrity Knitting. We have also found Joanna Lumley and Marie Helvin modelling knitwear for yarn companies Wendy and Lee Target.

**A passion for fashion**

The Library also holds the fascinating collection of Jane Waller, who is known for her pioneering work with vintage knitting patterns. Her collection includes Spanish and Hispanic items such as a pair of Balenciaga stockings, a fine black mantilla and South American hats, toys, slippers and flowers. She also gathered together photos and postcards representing many countries and themes, as well as books, journals, magazines and knitting patterns. This collection has provided the foundation for the Knitting Reference Library, so named in Montse’s honour and now located at the University’s Winchester Campus. This Library provides a wealth of material for researchers interested not only in the history of knitting, but in areas such as social history, gender studies and anthropology.

**Building the collection**

The Knitting Reference Library is on the Winchester Campus near the centre of Winchester, and visitors are welcome to come and make use of the variety of materials that are held here. The earliest works are the small Victorian knitting books, and the latest the knitting pattern books and exhibition catalogues of today. Visits are by prior appointment only, and you can check the comprehensive catalogue of the books and journals held by the Library before you visit. The knitting patterns and pattern books have all been sorted firstly by the named collector and then by type of knitwear according to decades. The online catalogue is accessible on the internet at www.southampton.ac.uk/library.

To get in touch, you can call 023 8059 8331, send an email to wsanpg@soton.ac.uk or take a look at the website at www.soton.ac.uk/intheloop.

Visit the Library

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