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The Wisdom of the Wool

Social bonding, political activism, and relaxation – all excellent reasons for the on-going knitting renaissance

by **Michaela Holler** on December 1, 2011.

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It's dangling from a hook in my hall wardrobe: 155×25 cm of fluffy burgundy, pink and turquoise, with specks of orange, a knitted comforter that will keep me cosy in the cold months. This labour of love is the result of some 12 hours of needlework, accomplished one dull rainy weekend at my mother's in the Styrian countryside.

Back in Vienna, I suddenly spot them everywhere: Knitters doing their purls and cables in coffee houses, in waiting rooms, on public transport all over town. Late one Wednesday afternoon, I strike a bonanza: "Laniato – Das Wiener Wollcafé", a wool-cum-coffee-shop, just off Landstrasse in the 3rd District. This is the dream of the Austrian Topsy Thun-Hohenstein, modelled after a knitting café she saw in Minneapolis; the name Laniato refers to *lana*, the Latin word for wool.



Closely knit: Topsy Thun-Hohenstein explains the Double Basket Weave | Photo: Hans Hochstätger

Inside, a handful of women are seated around a large oval-shaped wooden table sipping coffee, knitting and chatting animatedly. Others browse the crafts magazines. I head to one of the shop's large white cupboards, neatly filled with balls of exquisite wools – alpaca, cashmere and merino. I take one off the shelf to feel its softness and eye the women furtively: These are in their "middle youth", carefully coiffed and dressed in unobtrusive tan, grey and navy. Most patrons are between 30 and 40, estimates Thun-Hohenstein, who is 54.

But there are exceptions: Just then, a couple in their mid-20s enter the shop. The woman, in a pink knit beret, listens to Thun-Hohenstein's advice on which wools, colours and needles to use to make a scarf to match, while her companion paces up and down. Passers-by glance inside the shop windows at woolly hats, scarves, cushions and baby clothes – all taught at Thun-Hohenstein's workshops. "That's definitely something I am going to expand", she beams, handing me a flyer promoting her "ready to knit" kits of wool, knitting needles, instructions and a coupon for a drink – included in the workshop price of €40–60.

Knitters at "Strick Clique and the Wool Gang mit Milch" (Knitting clique ... with milk) are also hooked on the handmade. Mostly students in their 20s, this group meets every Tuesday evening at "Muskat", a small café with a book corner at Yppenplatz in the 16th District, hosted by designer Cloed Priscilla Baumgartner, whose label "Milch" is available in her eco-fashion showroom "Yppig" (a wordplay, meaning opulent), just opposite the venue.

On 8 Nov. at 18:00 sharp, Anna, Cornelia, Sarah, and Thaisa are sitting in a semi-circle on a corner sofa. All are beginners. Cornelia snatches a ball of blue shearings from a basket. Now what? Karin, a 30-something regular at the café, hands her baby daughter to her partner, and offers to help. Meanwhile, others start showing up. Lena, a student of linguistics who works as a nanny, has been attending for a couple of weeks and is pleased that she can learn something for free. Lisa, with an office job, says the meetings help her relax after a hard day. Her friends Shannon and Muna, both medical students, agree. Besides, they point out, it's more fun making things yourself than just buying them.

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“It’s important to know how much work a piece of knitting is”, says Lisa. “If you purchase all your clothes at H&M, you’ll never know.” Also, “it’s part of our cultural heritage that should be handed on”, says Cloed Baumgartner, who has just arrived. Sina, a student at Hetzendorf fashion school, has also joined them. Vivid and flamboyant, the slim brunette is a tongue-in-cheek version of Coco Chanel, sporting triangular dark-rimmed glasses and a black flower fascinator with a tiny veil pinned on top of her side bun, plus several long strings of off-white and dark grey pearls.

An all-girls group, the Strick Clique wouldn’t mind some male company: “We’ve tried to lure men with tasty soups, but without success so far”, Baumgartner jokes.

Men tend to be closet knitters, using websites like www.nadelspiel.com, which offers easy-to-follow instructional videos, also on DVD. The site’s members’ area, hosted by the Viennese knitter Elisabeth Wetsch, has 150,000 visitors per month, of whom, she estimates, 25 per cent are male.

Another web venture is the “Wiener Umschlag”, an online wool and knitwear store run by Vera Brlica and Katharina Nopp. The two young entrepreneurs have taken to knitting in public places like trains, bars and coffee houses, and meet every first Friday evening of the month at a café posted on their website www.umschlagplatz.at.

By contrast, the “Strickistinnen” (knitologists) are a group of self-confessed strictly feminist urban guerilla knitting activists, following a trend originating in the U.S. The group commemorated the centennial in March 2011 of the first Austrian women’s suffrage with “knit graffiti”, adorning trees and lampposts along the Ringstrasse with knits and crochets. The city government was not amused. Within 24 hours, the women’s permit was annulled and the city dustmen of MA 48 were ordered to remove the street art.

With a growing number of wool and knitwear shops sporting inventive names like “Zwei Glatt Zwei Verkehrt” (knit two, purl two), “Komme Was Wolle” (Come What Wool – a play on words between “come what may” or “is it wool”), “Laufmasche” (a run in a stocking), the business seems to be booming. However, there are no precise figures, as Chamber of Commerce (WKO) spokeswoman Gabriele Führer explains: “They are grouped in a category of fashion and leisure articles.”

Knitting is also a way for raising money for charities. In one current project, “Das Große Stricken”, the bottled fruit drink company Innocent Alps GmbH recruited Austrians to knit and send in tiny woolly hats that are put on the bottle tops, available in Billa and Merkur supermarkets. Thirty cents of each hat drink sold are donated to Caritas.

Recently on the U3, a woman sitting nearby reached into her bag, producing a small white piece of unfinished knitting and began to knit. She appeared contented, completely immersed, with the outside world shut out. Perhaps that’s the current fascination with this traditional craft: It slows you down. Like meditating, it’s relaxing and refreshing – not exactly negligible qualities in a world hit hard by recession and political turmoil.

So says the knowing logo of Grannies.Inc, a British online knitting store: “There is wisdom in the wool.”

Laniato – Das Wiener Wollcafé

3., Beatrixgasse 4

Mon.–Fri., 10:00–13:00 and 14:00–18:00; Sat., 9:30–17:00

(0) 699 152 499 11

www.laniato.com

Strick Clique and the Wool Gang mit Milch

at Muskat, Buch & Café

16., Brunnenmarkt/Marktplatz 154,

Tue., 18:00–22:00

(01) 405 94 96

<http://yppig.wordpress.com/gruppen-stricken>

Komme Was Wolle – Garne und

Handgestricktes

19., Billrothstrasse 92

Mon.–Fri., 9:30–12:30 and 13:30–18:00; Sat., 9:30–12:30

(0) 664 88 46 54 60

www.kommewaswolle.at

Laufmasche – Wolle und Garne

4., Argentinierstrasse 28
Tue.–Thu., 11:30–19:00; Fri., 11:30–20:00; Sat., 10:00–16:00
(0) 676 50 82 470
www.laufmasche.at

Zwei Glatt Zwei Verkehrt
8., Josefstädterstrasse 14
Mon.–Fri., 9:30–12:30 and 14:30–18:00;
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(01) 403 57 35
www.zweiglattzweiverkehrt.at

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