

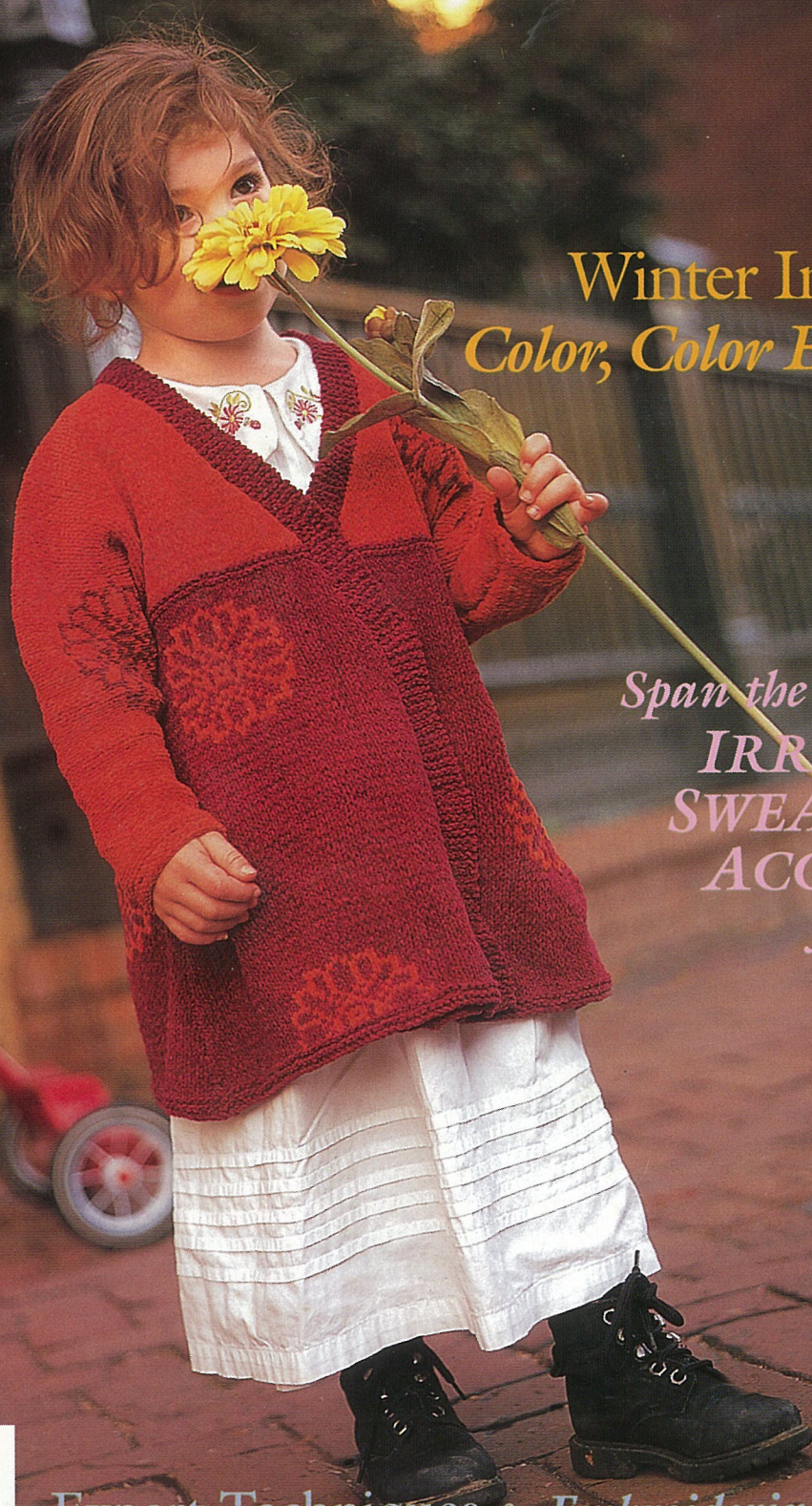
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Expert Techniques for Embroidering on Handknits

Meet Norwegian Designer Solveig Hisdal

SOLVEIG HISDAL

NORWAY'S NEWEST KNITTING STAR

Judith H. Dern



Photos: Solveig Hisdal



SMILING, SOLVEIG HISDAL recalls the way her fingers sweated during her first knitting project: a pair of small red mittens. "I think I was seven or eight when I learned to knit, first from my mother and later at school," she says. "In Norway, all girls learn to knit in the fourth grade, even boys learn today."

Slender and tall, with close-cropped brown hair and warm green eyes, Solveig, principal designer for Oleana, one of Norway's most successful young knitwear firms, is adding a brilliant new dimension to the centuries-old traditions of Scandinavian knitting. Solveig has achieved her success by melding vibrant color and innovative shape with historic Norwegian knitwear and folk-art motifs.

Intrigued by fashion early on, she studied graphic design and fashion at the National College of Art and Design in Bergen, her hometown on Norway's west coast. She graduated in 1976. "I always knew I wanted to do something creative," Solveig notes, recalling the many happy childhood hours she spent roaming the folk-art department of a Bergen museum and drawing in her sketchpad. "Dressing women and girls in beautiful clothes was my favorite theme," she adds. It wasn't, however, until the 1990s—after working for many years as a clothing designer and boutique owner, studying fashion illustration and graphic design, as well as raising three children—that she began to consider knitwear design as a profession.

Solveig's first step into her new career was participation in "Love on a Round Needle," a 1991 knitting exhibition that traveled throughout Norway. For this exhibition she designed a deep rose and red wool jacket with a blue pearl-embroidered bodice. "Knitting appealed to my fantasies in a very different way from designing clothes," she explains. With knits, she had even more control over color, pattern, and form than she did with sewn clothing. At an Oslo art gallery the following year, in a solo show called "Wedding Shirts from a City Girl," Solveig presented twenty knitted

designs inspired by the traditional Norwegian wedding jacket.

Among the visitors to the exhibition were two founders of Oleana, a company newly formed to produce and sell modern sweaters honoring Norway's long-standing knitting tradition. They quickly recognized Solveig's talent—and how well it meshed with their creative goals—and hired her as a part-time freelance designer. Shortly thereafter she became the company's full-time principal designer. Keeping the Oleana mission in mind, Solveig each year designs six to twelve beautifully styled cardigans and pullovers for women and men in unique, sophisticated colorways, many with exquisite embellishments such as brass buttons from France and Germany, floral brocade trim, and velvet ribbon. All are machine-produced and hand-finished at the Oleana factory in Norway.

Solveig's main source of design inspiration for her Oleana sweaters is Norway's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century folk dress, or *bunad* (pronounced boo-nahd), which she views at museums all over Norway and abroad, including the Bergen museum where she wandered so happily as a child. Traditionally worn on Sundays and for special occasions like weddings and funerals, this clothing was made with the most beautiful fabrics and trims that people could afford, including lace and velvet, metal lace and embroidery, and elaborately woven multicolored trims and braids. Back then, comments Solveig, who is particularly enamored of bodices in damask and brocade, "people were not afraid of decorating with a mixture of pattern, material, quality, and color." This decorative expression of exuberance and fantasy in clothing, she observes, has largely been forgotten.

In addition to these rich textiles, Solveig finds her

Solveig (center) is always alert to the creative possibilities around her. The wooden "bowl" in which she placed the vibrant orange and gold yarn in the left-hand photograph is actually an adornment from an eighteenth-century bed frame. Dikt i masker (Poetry in Stitches) contains twenty-two of Solveig's designs.

creative muse in many other sources: the blues and yellows of an old painted boat, the grays and black of a seemingly bleak winter landscape, Japanese art, lichens growing on rocks beside the sea, and flowers of all sorts. She also stays abreast of trends in the fashion, interior design, and textile industries. "I am concerned that the clothing I design expresses the spirit of our time, so there are many sources of inspiration I seek out," she says.

Usually Solveig photographs the places and objects that inspire her, then reviews the images when she is ready to design, pulling from them elements, such as colors and forms, that she thinks will work in a sweater. Next, she makes simple sketches of sweater possibilities that capture the essence and mood of the selected photo elements. As a design progresses, she moves to her computer and knitting machine, where she makes swatches. Typically, this process takes several days. When she is happy with her swatches, she meets with the Oleana team and together they refine the design concept. At this point, Oleana makes a sample garment. Once that has been refined, the sweater is reproduced hundreds at a time by the workers at the factory.

A testament to Solveig's talent, Oleana has received awards from both the Norwegian Design Council and the Norwegian Trade Council, and Oleana sweaters are sold throughout Scandinavia and in the United States. In 1997, Solveig's first book of designs for handknitters, *Dikt i masker* (*Poetry in Stitches*), was published in Norway—to rave reviews. Interestingly, when first asked to write the book by the publisher, Solveig refused, uncomfortable because, while she enjoys handknitting, most of the time she designs for the machine. But when the publisher told her they wanted her to style and take the photographs, and design the book's layout, she couldn't resist the broad creative opportunity. She decided she would continue to design most of the garments on the computer, but would have them handknitted by friends and family, then do the finishing herself. The result is a collection of twenty-two designs, mostly for women, all styled and photographed with Solveig's delightful sense of fantasy and whimsy: A pink and green cardigan festooned with leaves lies over the back of a wooden chair, a bird's nest delicately



balanced on one cuff; women model sweaters wearing long skirts of silk, satin, and chiffon, and crowns of twigs and flowers on their heads; a baby bonnet with beads and pompoms rests in a field of teeny purple flowers; an infant dressed in her sweater and cap slumbers in the grass. The book also includes photographs and text about the museum pieces (textiles and furniture), landscapes, and flowers that inspired and influenced the designs.

Solveig divides most of her work time between her sunny home studio, surrounded by a rainbow of yarns, sample sweaters, and a bounty of magazines and clippings, and the Oleana factory, a fifteen-minute car ride away. In addition to designing for Oleana, she takes on freelance assignments, such as designing children's clothing and women's underwear for other companies. She is also actively involved in presenting her work. She closed 1999 with three different shows: an Oleana fashion show in Munich, Germany; a fashion show of her knitwear (both for Oleana and from her book) at a Nordic knitting conference in Copenhagen, where she was also the keynote speaker; and a one-woman exhibition at the West Norway Museum for Applied Art in Bergen, for which she displayed artistic interpretations of garments

from the Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, Empire, and other historical periods. But her ideal day, she admits, "would be one without phones and faxes, where I could just bury myself in being creative." ∞

Judith Dem, a writer and professional weaver, has been knitting since she was ten. Her ongoing passion for Scandinavia began when she spent a year studying handweaving in Finland. Fourteen trips later, it's still her favorite part of the planet. Solveig Hisdal's book, *Dikt i masker*, is available (in Norwegian) from Norsk Fjord Fiber (828-884-2195). Two patterns from this book appear in English on pages 14 through 18 of this issue of *Knits*. In December 2000, Solveig will be in the United States for the opening of an exhibition of Oleana sweaters and folk art at the Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa (319-382-9681). For information about purchasing Oleana sweaters in the United States (these are not the same sweaters that appear in Solveig's book), contact Dahl Enterprises International (800-538-1627).



The flowers on the pullover and cardigan shown at left and in the swatch below were inspired by the painted flowers on the inside of the nineteenth-century wooden storage chest (above) at the Vestvågøy Museum in Fygge, Norway. The patterns for both begin on page 14.

