

A Conversation With Barbara G. Walker

Meg chats with Barbara Walker about mosaic knitting, obsessions (knitting and otherwise) and an upcoming auction of hand-knit originals.

How fortunate we are that at age 35 Barbara G. Walker turned her magnificent brain to hand knitting and taught herself to knit. Because she found plain knitting “an awful bore,” she began researching the more interesting aspects of stitch patterns and haunted the “dark, dusty, catacomblike stacks” of books and magazines in the Library of Congress. We are all the beneficiaries of her classic *Treasury* quartet; to this day they remain indispensable references in every knitter’s library.

Over the ensuing decades, Walker’s *Learn-to-Knit Afghan Book*, *Knitting From the Top* and *Mosaic Knitting* titles followed, along with a prodigious output of knitted items: more than 300 garments, fifteen large afghans, bedspreads and blankets, and countless socks, hats, mittens, doilies, table covers and shawls. This fall, knitters will have the opportunity to own a piece of knitting history, as Schoolhouse Press will auction a number of Barbara’s original hand-knitted items. [See box for more information.] To the foregoing list of adult items, add more than 600 small garments Barbara knit for her collection of 400 dolls. (To see eighteen of the dolls dressed head to toe in knitted artifacts and to read Barbara’s essay “Knitted Doll Clothes,” go to the Schoolhouse Press website, www.schoolhousepress.com/barbarawalkerdolls.htm.)

In the following interview, Barbara talks about her knitting life, research projects and her favorite technique, mosaic knitting.

MS: In all of your historical research, have you ever come across anything about the art of knitting?

BW: I’ve never found a specific reference to knitting in ancient history, other than the Dura-Europos patterns reproduced in the *Second Treasury*. But as these patterns are fairly sophisticated, one can assume that knitting was well known long before the third century B.C.E.

MS: What purposes has your knitting had?

BW: I did knitwear designing for yarn-company publications and magazines for a number of years, as well as original family clothing, bedspreads, tablecloths, pillows, etc., and of course all of the swatches illustrating my books. I slowed down and eventually laid

aside the knitting because we were positively glutted with “knitties,” and I had new obsessions as I researched and compiled my books on comparative religion, feminism, minerals, tarot, et al. Today, because I live in Florida, I knit very little, so I’ve decided to auction off a number of hand-knit items that have been lying around unworn in my air-conditioned closets for many years.

MS: You have developed many original patterns for mosaic knitting. Why is mosaic your favorite stitch?

BW: I like to work in mosaics because they’re easy to do, and enormously



LISA LOWERY BAREFIELD

flexible. Almost any design that you want to draw on your graph paper can be realized in mosaics with little effort. The use of graph paper to chart pattern directions was what I presented in both the *Third* and *Fourth Treasuries*, and I found it much simpler to draw the directions than to write them. It’s also easier to follow, because the charts show you an actual picture of the pattern as it develops.

I first coined the term “mosaic knitting” for a chapter in my book *A Second Treasury of Knitting Patterns*, originally published in 1970 [40 new mosaic patterns]. I presented more mosaics in a chapter of *Charted Knitting Designs*, published in 1972 [62 new patterns] and in a chapter of *Sampler Knitting* (now the *Fourth Treasury*), published in 1973 [45 new patterns]. Finally, my book *Mosaic Knitting* was published in 1976 [380 new patterns]. All of the mosaic patterns in these four books are my inventions, so you might say that mosaic knitting is my brainchild.

I find it amusing that mosaic knitting is now considered a hot new item, since I invented it, so to speak, more than forty years ago. Of course, two-color slip-stitch knitting has been known for a long time, but not very much was done with it. No previous knitter seems to have extended the technique to create so many different designs. Mosaic knitting has great flexibility in texture as well. It can be worked in garter stitch, stockinette stitch or a combination of the two. Working one color with wrong-side rows knitted, and the other color with wrong-side rows purled, makes an interesting effect that somewhat resembles embroidery on a smooth background. I have often used this technique with metallic thread, which some people at first glance have thought an application of beads. But it’s not jeweled; it just looks that way.

MS: How did you become interested in knitting?

BW: Neither my mother nor any other female relative did any kind of needlework, so until I was 35 I knew nothing about it. After I was married, I got a sewing machine and learned to make my own clothes. My husband and I were into square dancing, so I made us many of the matching outfits—big-skirted dresses for me and fancy western-style shirts for him. Later I decided that I’d like to design my own sweaters, so I taught myself to knit from a little Bernat learn-to-knit pamphlet. I found it rather boring (the same movements, thousands of times over) until I bought a few knitting magazines

and realized that there were hundreds of different pattern stitches to be learned.

There were no compendia of pattern stitches available in the U.S. at the time. The only collections I found were those of James Norbury and Mary Thomas, both published in England. So I began making my own collection. After two or three years I put several hundred patterns together in a book, my first *Treasury*, which sold well. I was encouraged to collect even more and also to invent my own, which is what the subsequent books show. Altogether, I have invented more than 1,000 original patterns, more than anyone else known to history.

Recently Barbara asked me to help her auction scores of her knitted items. When asked why she wanted to auction her knits, Barbara wrote: “I’m glad to let so many of my old knitting projects go to new owners, because in Florida I hardly ever wear any of them; shorts and tee shirts are my uniform. (Of course, I have kept back a few of the fancier things, so I can dress up sometimes, at least in winter.) I think it may please some knitters to possess something that I knitted with my own hands. I never used a knitting machine or employed anyone else to do any part of my work.” Schoolhouse Press will hold three auctions in late fall. Please friend us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/SchoolhousePress) or visit www.schoolhousepress.com for Look Book availability and auction dates.

New & Knitworthy

I did American-style knitting for three or so years, as the pamphlet taught me, but then I happened to observe the knitting of a neighbor who had emigrated from Europe. I realized that her way of knitting was more efficient, so I switched to the Continental style. This is the style that I teach in my *Learn-to-Knit Afghan Book*, which uses every known type of knitting in one afghan—the idea being that when you finish, you'll be familiar with lace, cables, slip stitches, eyelets, twist stitches, mosaic and every other technique. Of course you knit this project American-style just as well, but the instructions demonstrate Continental style for the raw beginner.

MS: You seem to prefer to knit garments from the top, and in the round.

BW: I worked nearly all my garments from the top down, which is the easiest way to achieve a perfect fit, as demonstrated in *Knitting From the Top*. I like to use different approaches also, like starting the garment in the middle of the back and working outward, or starting at a corner and working on the diagonal, or doing a skirt sideways. I always disliked sewing seams, so almost every garment was worked in the round and as seamless as possible. Unlike sewn clothing, knitwear can actually be made of one infinitely flexible continuous thread: an intriguing concept, don't you think?

M: What kind of reactions did you get from others regarding knitting in public or the garments you wore? Was knitting unusual at the time?

BW: I didn't knit in public or with a group. I needed to concentrate, as I was almost always creating something new. I wanted no distractions when I was planning both the project and its patterns in my head, knitting a row and writing it down, knitting another row and writing it down, etc. I don't know if knitting was considered unusual, but it was a large part of my life, occupying many hours a day. Of course, when I wore one of my creations to a party or some such thing, I always got the high-pitched "Did you *make* that?" I intended the garments to be impressive, and they usually were, because they were one-of-a-kind original designs. After my very first sweater, which I copied from a magazine, I never again followed anyone else's directions. I made my own. Your mom [Elizabeth Zimmermann] was the one person with whom I corresponded often, and whose witty remarks I always enjoyed.

MS: Do you have any general advice for knitters?

BW: I think the toughest part of being a creative knitter is the finishing—and I don't mean the final touches on a garment. I mean getting the thing finished. How many knitters have large numbers of unfinished projects lying around the house, which they swear they're going to get to eventually, but somehow the numbers keep building up? I found that while I was occupied with one project, a dozen new ideas for other projects would pop into my head, all of which I wanted to start immediately. It took a lot of determination to stick to the current project until it was finished, even if I was already bored with it, before permitting myself to start anything else. So I found that I must restrict myself to only one project at a time. I became a very unusual example of the dedicated knitter: one with no unfinished projects lying around. My most basic advice to other knitters is: Always finish your project, even if you're dying to start that much more interesting new thing.

MS: Why did you stop knitting? What piqued your interest next?

BW: I had been doing research ever since college days on comparative religions and mythology, and the voluminous notes were building up into a new book, the 1,100-page *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, which eventually won a Book of the Year award from the *London Times*. That was followed by *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*, for which I did my own artwork, as I also did for The Barbara Walker Tarot Deck and my I Ching of the Goddess cards. Drawing and painting these projects took more of my time. I also did an autobiography, a novel, a book of short stories (*Feminist Fairy Tales*), a book on minerals (another obsession), and several others. It seems that every subject I ever took up became an in-depth study.

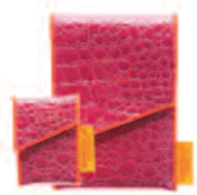
Knitting books written by Barbara G. Walker and published by Schoolhouse Press include A Treasury of Knitting Patterns, A Second Treasury of Knitting Patterns, Charted Knitting Designs: A Third Treasury of Knitting Patterns, A Fourth Treasury of Knitting Patterns, Knitting From the Top, Mosaic Knitting, Barbara Walker's Learn-to-Knit Afghan Book, as well as fourteen additional books on a variety of other subjects. Barbara lives in Florida with her husband Gordon.



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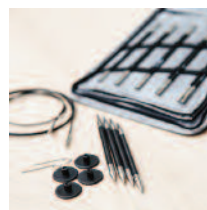
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