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# OF KNITS AND MEN

BY DONNA BULSECO

*Knitting has come a long way, baby: Just ask any man who has taken up a pair of size 8 needles and a skein of wool to create a sweater, a scarf or a wool cap with his own bare hands. And there are a surprising number of them you could ask, from the boy next-door and the fireman down the block to the vascular surgeon who keeps his fingers nimble perfecting his cables.*

Isaac Mizrahi devoted a segment to knitting on his Oxygen Media television show; it's a hobby he's enjoyed since childhood. Designers Marc Jacobs and Todd Oldham use their hands-on knitting experience to create the gorgeous hand knits in their collections. The Web site [knitting.about.com](http://knitting.about.com) has a "Men Who Knit" link, complete with photos of handsome dudes who knit one, purl one, making sweaters for themselves and their wives, onesies for their new babies or afghans for their pals. The buzz has even extended to celebrities: You know that knitting has really arrived on the red carpet when rumors circulate that such stars as Robert De Niro and Russell Crowe knit. (Okay, it's just a rumor. But hey, guys—it's never too late to start!)

Ask any man who knits why he does it, and you'll hear many of the same reasons women give for engaging in the craft: it's a stress reliever, a way to pass the time and a source of creative expression. Though there's little stigma attached to men who enjoy the craft, many acknowledge that they've encountered at times a certain amount of curiosity and social stereotyping. They've raised eyebrows; some have endured teasing from friends and family and even been called sissies. Many of them knit only in private, or were so secretive they didn't tell anyone about their hobby until they had something to show for their efforts. Still, their interest never waned, because they loved knitting. And from the look of many of their finished projects, adversity has certainly begotten originality and devotion to the craft.

Canadian actor Kirk Dunn learned to knit to impress a girlfriend some fourteen years ago. "I always thought knitting was cool," says Dunn. "Because it involves mathematics, spatial relations and counting as well as color, texture and aesthetics, it seemed like the perfect marriage between the sciences and fine art." At first, he kept his knitting a

secret, gleaned the basics from an old Patons® *How to Knit* book. He was adept enough to create an Icelandic Lopli sweater in "nice thick wool" while practicing lines for a children's play about, appropriately enough, gender stereotyping entitled "Girls Can! Boys Can!"

Today, he practices what he preached so many years ago in that play—he clocks in knitting time at home in Toronto while taking care of his two young children. Last year, he knit a pair of green-and-blue variegated socks for his wife; a cardigan with blue diamonds and roses for his young daughter; and a huge 5-foot scarf using leftover yarn in hundreds of colors. "Knitting is a labor of love," says the actor, who rarely knits anything for himself. "I conceive a project for a person, choosing yarn and developing a pattern, and then I make it. It takes time and energy." One project he remembers fondly is a sweater he knit for his father, a minister, that featured two-toned, geometric orange and blue crosses. It was so vibrant, it caught the attention of renowned knitwear designer Kaffe Fassett, and Dunn was offered the chance to apprentice at Fassett's studio in London, a lifelong dream.

A shared characteristic of male knitters is that many learn by the book, then ignore the instructions, preferring instead to wing it by making up patterns, stitches and a gauge of their own. David Powers is a prime example of someone who moved quickly beyond the *America's Knitting Book* he learned by, and today he's creative and technically savvy enough to write his own how-to manual. "I don't follow what everyone else does," says Powers, who has lived in New York City for more than twenty years. "Everything I've knit has been from my own patterns. I never overdesign. Most people combine six or seven knitting ideas into a project, but when you do that, you end up with a beast."

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## OF KNITS AND MEN

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Douglas Weiss, director of design research for Limited Design Services, picked up a book to learn “how to get the yarn on and how to get it off,” then raced ahead to make a bright red, gray and chartreuse scarf inspired by a gorgeous one by Dries van Noten he’d seen at Barneys New York. Now, he’s confident enough to strike out on his own, designing a scarf that picks up a beautiful palette found in *The Designers Guide to Color*, which he uses in his job.

For most men who do it, knitting fuels creativity, but they also like the way it calms them down. When Peter Alvarez opened his own hair salon near Colorful Stitches, a yarn shop in Lenox, Massachusetts, he never guessed that he would find respite from the frenetic pace of his business right next-door. “Knitting is very peaceful—it’s a way to pass the time,” says Alvarez, whose first project was a gray cashmere hat done on circular needles. His daughter Priscilla likes to brag about his accomplishments, showing a photo of her handsome dad in an impressive navy mohair cowlneck that took him six months to finish.

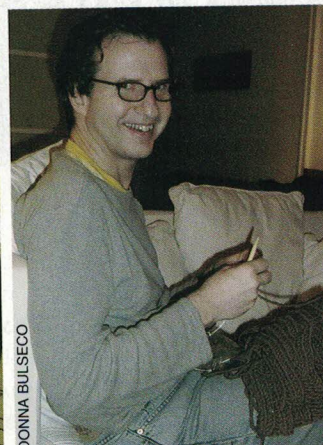
In the “Men Who Knit” forum on [knitting.about.com](http://knitting.about.com), John Sutton, who took up knitting while serving on a U.S. Navy ship, reveals how he loves “watching this thing of my own making grow slowly—sometimes too slowly—in my hands. I love finding a color combination that works. And I love the results, the satisfaction of being able to say, ‘I made it myself,’ which is even more special because so few people expect to hear it from a man.”

Amir Toos, senior vice president of production for the design house Badgley Mischka, thinks of knitting as “a form of meditation.” The father of three, he just finished a onesie in silk-and-wool tweed yarn for his infant daughter, trimming it at the waist with eyelet threaded with red leather cord.

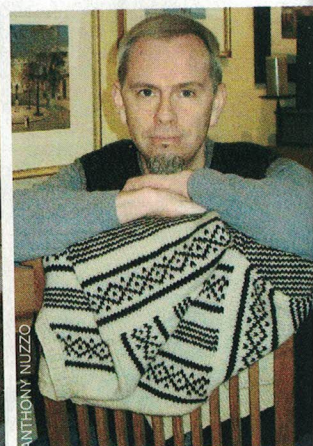
Even though knitting is primarily a solitary activity, most men enjoy its social benefits. For almost two years, David Powers, who lives in New York’s trendy TriBeCa neighborhood, spent part of his day knitting at the World Financial Center in lower Manhattan,



DONNA BULSECO



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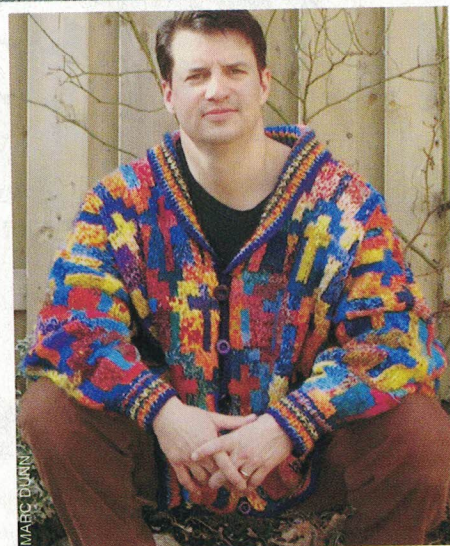
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Douglas Weiss was first inspired by a Dries van Noten scarf. Andrew Flynn, head art director at *Women’s Wear Daily*, joined a knitting group to hone his skills. David Powers used to spend part of his days knitting outdoors. Actor Kirk Dunn squeezes in time for knitting while caring for his two young children.

now closed as a result of the events of September 11. “Tourists would sneak photos of me, workers would stop to gauge my progress, and passersby would strike up conversations,” says Powers.

Another New York City knitter, Andrew Flynn, joined a knitting group to hone his skills. “I’m a little too self-conscious to knit in public,” he says, but the group, which meets once a month, helps build his confidence when he hits a snag or drops a stitch. He finished an aqua wool scarf for his niece and is on to a putty-colored “very Calvin Klein” sweater for himself, a fitting creation for the head art director at *Women’s Wear Daily*.

Composer Richard Rodney Bennett, who created the music for the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and is currently writing a saxophone quartet, was a member of the Big Apple Knitting Guild in New York for almost ten years. He attended lectures by knitting professionals given at the Guild and enjoyed the lively meetings. “When Kaffe [Fassett]’s first book came out, it was a passport into the world of knitting. I loved the technical side of it—cabling, manipulating colors—but was never really that tied to the idea of making sweaters,” says Bennett. His knitting was an exploration of color and texture, much like the paintings he does nowadays. And although he’s given away most of his yarn and needles to pursue art, he remains friends with those he met during his knitting odyssey.

“Boy Genius” is the way knitwear designer Nancy Winarick describes her pal Isaac Mizrahi, with whom she worked for many years developing hand-knit sweaters for his



MARC DUNN

fashion collections. Their friendship led to a knitting collaboration on his new TV show. “We knit matching monogrammed twin sets for Isaac and his dog Harry. Isaac knit his own in camel’s hair on size 5 [3.75mm] needles, and I did Harry’s,” she says. The designer, who was taught by his mother, is a very good knitter, but he relies on Nancy—his “knit doctor”—whenever he goes on a knitting binge.

*Vive la différence!* And may many more boy geniuses catch the knitting bug.

A native Californian, Donna Bulseco lives in New York with her husband and young son. She frequently writes about fashion, beauty, health and home decorating for *InStyle*, *More and Good Housekeeping*. She knit her first sweater—a chocolate-brown scoop neck she saw in *Vogue Knitting*—at the age of 10.