



LISTAHÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Iceland Academy of the Arts

Lopapeysa

The significance of patterns in the Icelandic sweater

Lotta Kaarina Nykänen

Final thesis for a BA-degree

Icelandic Academy of the Arts

Department of Design and Architecture

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Final thesis for a BA-degree in Graphic design

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Abstract

The Icelandic sweater has a reputation of being “traditional” or “original”, even though the sweater’s history goes back only a bit over half a century. The sweater is usually recognized by its yoke and sleeve patterns that have also been seen in mainstream fashion, but how important are those patterns in defining the sweater? This thesis tracks the development of the Icelandic sweater’s patterns and finds out how much inspiration was drawn from neighbouring nations, including Greenland, Norway and Sweden. Through examining the history of the sweater and how the sweater has developed over the years, we find how much significance the patterns hold and how much of Iceland’s own tradition is included in the design of the patterns. After covering the historical part of the research, we take a look at the sweater’s modern adaptations and future prospects, and how the patterns have taken a life of their own through social media. This thesis uses the method of qualitative analysis of literature and an overlook on current blogs and social media websites and is illustrated by pictures from the internet and the writer’s own projects. This thesis focuses on the pattern designs of the sweaters from the point of view of a graphic designer. In conclusions, we find that the patterns do not hold as much importance in defining the sweater as was thought before, but it is rather the material and the structure of the sweater that makes it traditional to Iceland.

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1 Introduction

Like in other Nordic countries, children in Finland learn to knit in elementary school. Like many other kids, I also made my first socks when I was about 10 years old – they were horrible and I hated every moment of making them. The Finnish school system failed to inspire me to continue knitting in my free time, but since those days, I have rediscovered knitting on my own. I made my first “Icelandic sweater” in 2013 from Finnish wool (Image 1) and got closer to my passion when I moved to Reykjavik in the fall of 2014. As an avid knitter and a graphic design student living in Reykjavík, it was only natural that I would be drawn to the graphic patterns of the Icelandic sweater, *lopapeysa*.

One could argue that everyone in Iceland has at least one Icelandic sweater that they use on a regular basis. Before moving to Iceland I had heard of this, but didn’t take it so seriously – that is until the first cold morning in the fall when I noticed that half the people in the morning lecture at the university were wearing lopapeysas, or digging them out from their bags. Ever since I came to Iceland, I must have knitted countless of socks and mittens and a dozen sweaters from different Icelandic wool-types and gone through a variety of patterns and techniques. In my opinion as a knitter, knitting the pattern on the yoke is the best part in making the sweater – it is at the same time very repetitive and easy to follow, but at times challenging and exciting to work with. This lead me to examine the work that goes into designing the patterns and how they have formed over the years.



Image 1: My first “Icelandic sweater”, “Dalur” from the book “Knitting with Icelandic wool”.

When I first got introduced to the Icelandic sweaters, I thought the graphic patterns in the yoke were the defining factor – but are there other factors that are more important in defining the sweater? In this thesis, I will try to find out what really is the significance of the patterns in the Icelandic sweater and how have the patterns developed over the years. Where do the patterns draw inspiration from? How are they designed and who designs them? Have the patterns changed with the current trends and fashion?

To find answers to these questions, I will have to start from the beginning: the material of the sweaters. Following the history of the material, I will take a look at how the knitting traditions of the surrounding nations have influenced the patterns, and how much of Iceland's own tradition is truly included in the pattern designs. As a graphic designer, the design process that goes into making the patterns is of particular interest to me: what restrictions does the sweater's shape and material bring to the designer, and on the other hand, what possibilities does it offer? In a world of blogs and social media platforms, anyone can be a designer; this is why I will also see how has the internet affected the rise of Icelandic sweater's popularity amongst knitters and how do people share their designs? Finally, I will take a look at how the patterns have morphed from traditional into more modern adaptations and how the sweater has made its way to mainstream fashion in Iceland and internationally.

The method I chose for the research of this thesis is qualitative analysis of literature. I will be using a variety of publications, blogs, articles, pattern books and online journals to collect information on the research topic. In qualitative research of literature, it is not important to use complete publications, but rather to collect the information that is most essential for the research – in other words the method focuses on the quality instead of quantity.¹ Since the research in this case is rather small, I will be using this method to conduct a literary review of the material I have gathered.

There have been a number of papers and research articles written about Icelandic wool, sweaters and knitting traditions, most of them written in Icelandic. Due to language

¹ Guijuan Lin, "Higher Education Research Methodology – Literature Method," *International Education Studies* vol. 2 no. 4 (2009): 179, accessed October 16, 2016, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1065734.pdf>.

restrictions, the material I'm examining is mainly in English, although some publications I have taken the time to translate in order to get the more information on the subject. From the English material a big portion are pattern books translated from Icelandic to English, and blog posts from various knitting and Iceland themed blogs. Although English articles on the subject of Icelandic sweaters are few, some of them provide great overlook on the history and tradition of the sweaters and shed light on the politic history of the sweater as well. As I look into the current situation of the sweater, I will also use social media platforms such as Facebook, Raverly and Instagram to find out what influence they've had in the sweater designing.

I chose this subject because I see many things in common with knit design and graphic design: both disciplines are subject to technical constrain and constant pressure on marketing, and both fields have a similar working process. Due to the fact that this is a thesis focusing on the graphic side of Icelandic sweaters, I have chosen to include many pictures. The pictures in the thesis are shown relatively large, since the focus is on the patterns of the sweaters, and no details can be spared.

2 Lopapeysa

Since this is an English thesis on a subject that has many Icelandic terms, I deemed it necessary to go through some of the concepts that I am going to be using throughout the paper. The Icelandic word for the sweater is *lopapeysa*, a term formed from two separate words: *lopi* (the wool from Icelandic sheep) and *peysa* (a sweater), so the word literally means “a sweater made from Icelandic wool”.² The word *peysa* has been in Icelandic vocabulary long before Icelandic sweaters, and it carries a funny story: it is told that the word comes from the French seafarers who wanted to buy the same kind of sweaters the Icelandic farmers were wearing, and the farmers thought the men meant “sweater” when they referred to them with the French word for a farmer, *paysan*.³ Although the English translation of *lopapeysa* as *Icelandic sweater* is accurate enough, there is a difference between these two terms: the original word in Icelandic is more accurate in describing the sweater, and the English term refers to the country of origin instead of the material.⁴

The word *lopi* means wool from the Icelandic sheep, although originally the word referred to unspun yarn that was not considered a finished product to knit with: this was before the mechanization of the wool industry, so the word was used for the material that was between the stages of spinning and combing.⁵ The wool has two different types: *þel*, which is the short and soft hair found on the inner layer of the wool coat, and *tog*, which is the long and coarse hair found on the top layer of the wool.⁶ These two fibers are important in choosing the sheep to shear: to make fine garments, only the finest parts of the sheep’s wool is used.⁷ In modern *lopi*-yarns there are different stages of spun: unspun *plötulopi*, semi-spun *álafosslopi* and fully spun *einband*, and these types are used to get to different results.⁸

² Guðrun Helgadóttir, “Nation in a Sheep’s Coat: The Icelandic sweater,” *FORMakademisk* vol. 4 nr. 2 (2009): 59, accessed October 9, 2016, doi: 10.7577/formakademisk.201.

³ Magnús Guðmundsson, *Ull Verður Gull: Ullariðnaður Íslendinga Á Síðari Hluta 19. Aldar Og Á 20. Öld* (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafélagið, 1988,) 96.

⁴ Guðrun, “Nation in a Sheep’s Coat,” 63.

⁵ Guðrun, “Nation in a Sheep’s Coat,” 63.

⁶ Elsa E. Guðjónsson, “The Origins of Icelandic Knitting,” in *Knitting with Icelandic Wool* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2013,) 9-20.

⁷ Magnús, *Ull Verður Gull*, 156.

⁸ “Knitting Wool,” Istex, accessed September 29, 2016, <http://www.istex.is/english/products/knitting-wool>.

The knitting techniques in Iceland have very much stayed the same over the years: Icelanders still use mainly continental knitting, where a knitting needle is held in each hand with the wool lying in between them, being intertwined with the index finger of the left hand (Image 2).⁹ Icelandic knitting was, and still is, usually done exclusively in the round, using five or more needles, depending on the size of the garment.¹⁰ Since yarn from other countries was a rare commodity when the two-colored sweaters first came to Iceland, lopi gained popularity quickly as the main material for the sweaters. The sweaters made from lopi were thick and were used for outdoor activities and winter sports.¹¹ Even though the wool industry has since developed more yarn types that use a blend of less scratchy wools, lopi is the preferred material to knit the sweaters with: it is local, it is cheap and it comes in a variety of colors and weights (thickness), and has great qualities in protection against both wind and rain.¹²



Image 2: Continental knitting.

⁹ Guðjónsson, “The Origins of Icelandic Knitting,” 14.

¹⁰ Guðjónsson, “The Origins of Icelandic Knitting,” 13.

¹¹ Guðjónsson, “The Origins of Icelandic Knitting,” 19.

¹² “The Icelandic Wool,” Istex, accessed September 30, 2016, <http://www.istex.is/english/the-icelandic-wool/>.

The lopapeysa is knitted from the bottom up and has a very simple anatomy: the sweater consists of a bottom part that is knitted in a round with circular needles, two arms that are knitted with five needles per arm and then joined in the round with the bottom part, (Image 3). After joining the arms to the bottom, the yoke is knitted with two or more colors using stranded colorwork technique while evenly decreasing the stitches until the neckline is made.¹³ When the sweater is done, the underarm holes are crafted to create a seamless finish to the sweater.

Stranded colorwork is a universal name for a knitting technique where two or more colors are used in each row, using one strand at a time. This is a very popular technique in Nordic countries probably due to the fact that the garments made with stranded colorwork are warmer and more durable, since the pattern part will have two or more colors layered on top of each other.¹⁴ The lopapeysa is knitted in a non-varying circle, which means that there is no difference between the back and the front unless a zipper is applied.



Image 3: Typical lopapeysa with patterns also in the sleeves and hem.

¹³ Lacie Lynnae, "Sweater Construction Methods: Circular Yoke," *30 Day Sweater*, accessed October 28, 2016, <http://30daysweater.com/sweater-construction-methods-circular-yoke/>.

¹⁴ Mary Scott Huff, "Knitting: Stranded Colorwork Explained," *Dummies*, accessed October 20, 2016, <http://www.dummies.com/crafts/knitting/designs-patterns/knitting-stranded-colorwork-explained/>.

If the sweater is made with a zipper or buttons, it is still knitted the same way as a closed sweater and then cut open later with scissors. In the knitting process, two stitches in the middle of the sweater are purled (backwards knit stitch) to indicate where the sweater is going to be cut open for the zipper.

The yoke of the sweater has usually two to three colors, using a maximum of three colors per row. The bottom part of the yoke pattern is usually repeated in the sweater's hem and sleeves. However, during the 21st century knitters started to simplify the sweater by dropping the lower patterns, and today the sweaters often have patterns only in the yoke, keeping the style of the sweater very simple (Image 4).¹⁵ Part of the reason for this might have also been to quicken the knitting process: dropping the lower patterns meant faster results and smaller production time.



Image 4: Lopapeysa with only the yoke pattern.

¹⁵ Guðrun, "Nation in a sheep's coat," 59.

3 Origins of the sweater

3.1 Influence from other countries

According to one story of the lopapeysa's origins, the sweater was in fact first knit by the wife of Icelandic Nobel prize winner Halldór Laxness, Auður Laxness. The story goes, that Halldór brought Auður a book about Inca culture from his travels, and Auður knit a round yoked sweater inspired by these patterns. Auður's claim as the creator of lopapeysa has though been very much argued, and no definite proof has been found on the subject, since many Icelandic women were knitting up similar things at those times.¹⁶

It is though more likely that the sweater got its inspiration through other Nordic countries instead of Inca patterns, since Nordic knitting traditions have become very much intertwined over the years. This makes it very hard to find "the beginning" of tradition, when neighboring countries can have such a big influence in one nation's design tradition. Kate Davies describes this phenomenon in her blog:

Knitting is a fluid and mobile medium in so many senses, traveling around the ocean on the backs of seafaring men, copied and innovated upon by enterprising women. [...] I have come to realize that all of the national or regional knitting styles I'm interested in have a relatively short history, and all are connected, in one way or another, to each other. I have started to think it is more useful to speak of a fluid set of Nordic regional textile practices rather than national "traditions".¹⁷

Because clothes are, and have always been, an inseparable part of the human history, it is normal to associate certain textile-types to certain countries: Chinese silk, Indian cotton, all hold connotations to their countries of origins, and the lopapeysa is no exception.¹⁸

¹⁶ Árni Árnason, "Screaming Jumpers: A Brief History of the Lopapeysa," *The Reykjavik Grapevine*, May 5, 2014, <http://grapevine.is/mag/articles/2014/05/05/screaming-jumpers/>.

¹⁷ Kate Davies, "Knitwear and Cultural Relativism," *Kate Davies Designs*, October 14, 2014, <https://katedaviesdesigns.com/2014/10/14/knitwear-and-cultural-relativism/>.

¹⁸ Guðrun, "Nation in a sheep's coat", 60.

3.2 Greenland

Although Icelanders talk about the sweater as a traditional garment, it actually dates back a bit over half a century.¹⁹ Going all the way back in the chain of inspiration, we come across the Greenlandic national dress *nuilarmiut* (Image 5) and the Norwegian designs derived from it. The national dress of Greenland has two distinctive parts: the women's dress has a colorful beaded collar, and both men and women have white skin boots with colorful embroidery. The glass beads date all the way back to 17th century, when missionaries from Europe arrived and introduced fabrics and glass beads to the native people; before this, the dress would have beads made from bone. Prior to the Europeans arrival Greenlanders used mainly animal skins to make their clothing, since there were little other materials found in the nature. The glass beads were incorporated into the national dress and have remained an important part of the garment ever since.²⁰ The brightly colored beaded yoke served as inspiration to knit designers in other Nordic countries in the 19th century when Norwegians copied the yoke design of the dress.



Image 5: Martha, an Inuit woman, sits on a grass slope, wearing traditional dress. Greenland, 1930.

¹⁹ Magnús, *Ull verður gull*, 96.

²⁰ "Traditional Dress," Greenland.com, accessed October 27, 2016, <http://www.greenland.com/en/about-greenland/culture-spirit/traditional-dress/>.

Laurie Bertram explains the reasons behind the copying of *nuilarmiut* in her blog:

[...] The first Scandinavian pattern based on the nuilarmiut began to circulate in Norway in the early 1930s amid Norwegian campaigns against Denmark for territorial rights in Greenland. Norwegians claimed that their medieval roots in Norse Greenland trumped Denmark's claims to the island and its valuable natural resources. [...] Norwegian women expressed their support in the conflict through a kind of nationalist knitting campaign that highlighted the relationship between Norway and Greenland.²¹

As Bertram later points out, though very much influenced by *nuilarmiut* (among other Nordic sweater designs), Icelandic sweaters are more defined by the wool than the pattern of the yoke or the shape of the sweater.²²

3.3 Norway

There are three different types of Norwegian sweaters: Marius, Setesdal, Fana and Voss.²³ The Norwegian sweater is traditionally made from soft and fine Norwegian wool, using stranded colorwork knitting technique (Image 6).²⁴ The shape of the shoulders typical to the Norwegian sweaters never caught much popularity in Iceland, so the technique of doing even decreases in the yoke became the main method of knitting the lopapeysa.²⁵



Image 6: Norwegian Marius-sweater.

²¹ Laurie Bertram, "Power Patterns: Discussing the Icelandic Sweater and the Greenlandic Nuilarmiut at the Pitt Rivers Museum," *Object Lives and Global Histories in Northern North America*, September 9, 2015, <http://objectlives.com/discovery-workshop/2015/9/8/power-patterns>.

²² Bertram, "Power patterns".

²³ Eline Oftedal, *Knit Nordic: 20 Contemporary Accessories Inspired by 4 Traditional Sweater Patterns* (Kindle: 2014).

²⁴ "100% Wool," Dale of Norway, accessed October 30, 2016, <http://eu.daleofnorway.com/heritage/100-percent-wool/>.

²⁵ Guðjónsson, "The Origins of Icelandic Knitting," 19.

In 1932, a Norwegian knitting pattern book was published with the sweater “Eskimo” designed by Annichen Sibbern Bøhn (Image 7).²⁶ This sweater was based on the traditional Greenlandic costume *nuilarmiut* with its elaborate yoke and did not have seamed sleeves like other Norwegian sweaters, but instead it was knitted with a circular yoke. It is very apparent just by looking at this sweater type that there is a clear connection between the knitting traditions in Scandinavia and the creation of the Icelandic sweater. On first glance, the sweaters could be mistaken for Icelandic, but there are some crucial differences between the techniques and the material of the sweaters. Where Norwegian sweaters used fine merino wool²⁷, Icelanders kept to their rough Icelandic wool, and so that became the defining factor in the lopapeysa.



Image 7: Eskimo sweater, Norway 1953.

²⁶ Bertram, “Power Patterns.”

²⁷ “100% Wool.”

The Eskimo pattern was re-published in a Danish magazine, where it was picked up by an Icelandic woman and knitted in Iceland. The popularity of the Eskimo sweater inspired the design of a sweater called “Grænlenzk peysa” (Greenlandic sweater, Image 8) in Iceland, which was published in a knitting magazine in 1956.²⁸ The Greenlandic sweater design had more elaborate yoke patterns than the Icelandic sweaters we see today since it was modeled after the Eskimo sweater that was designed after the Greenlandic national dress. These events lead the knitting people of Iceland to come up with their signature sweater’s look: round yoked sweater made from lopi.²⁹

The sweater became popular very fast largely because it was so easy to knit: the knitting took minimum amount of seaming due to the circular technique and using the thicker version of lopi, Álafósslopi, the sweater took even less time to finish.³⁰ In no time, lopapeysa became almost a uniform for the people of Iceland.³¹ The knitting charts drew inspiration from old chart books or foreign patterns, but many later designs have been made especially for the Icelandic sweater.



Image 8: *Grænlenzk peysa*, Iceland 1958.

²⁸ Bertram, “Power Patterns.”

²⁹ Guðjónsson, “The Origins of Icelandic Knitting,” 20.

³⁰ Magnús, *Ull verður gull*, 97.

³¹ Guðrun, “Nation in a sheep’s coat,” 59.

3.4 Sweden

The influence of the Bohus sweaters has been in discussion when talking about the origins of the lopapeysa recently.³² Bohus knitting is usually overlooked when talking about knitting techniques in Nordic countries, but the similarities between the sweater and its other Nordic counterparts are very easy to see. Although the techniques used are very different, it may well be that Bohus sweaters served as inspiration in regards of colors and yoke designs, even though the patterns weren't in public use.³³

Unlike with the Norwegian designs, the connection between Bohus and lopapeysa sweaters is not so easy to track down. Named after the company Bohus Sticking that produced them, the Bohus sweaters use even finer angora wool resulting in a delicate and fine pattern in the yoke (Image 9).³⁴ The Bohus sweater was created by Emma Jacobson who came up with the sweater to help women get some extra income for their families during the depression. The knitting patterns were a mystery for a long time and only available as completed sweaters, due to the careful protection by the creator; since there was no chance of recreating them at home, the sweaters held their value for a very long time. The patterns have however been made public and recreated for pattern books after the company was disbanded.³⁵



Image 9: Bohus sweater, Sweden 1950.

³² Soffía Valdimarsdóttir, "Hvað Er Íslenska Lopapeysan Gömul Og Hver Er Uppruni Hennar?," *Vísindavefurinn*, August 23, 2013, accessed October 2, 2016, <http://www.visindavefur.is/svar.php?id=62896>.

³³ "Bohus Knitting in the Future," *Angora Garnet*, accessed October 10, 2016, <http://www.angoragarnet.com/en/bohus-stickning/about-bohus-stickning-32248265>.

³⁴ "Bohus Knitting: The Story of Its Start," *Craftsy*, accessed September 5, 2016, <https://www.craftsy.com/blog/2013/06/bohus-knitting/>.

³⁵ Wendy Keele, *Poems of Color: Knitting in the Bohus Tradition* (Colorado: Interweave press Inc., 1995), 6.

4 Patterns

4.1 Development of the patterns

It is usually said that the most distinctive part of the lopapeysa are the patterns found in the bottom of the sweater and in the yoke. When the sweater first gained popularity in Iceland, the main colors of lopi used in the sweaters would be the ones found naturally in the sheep: white, grey, brown and black.³⁶ The colors were restricted to natural variations, but this changed quickly after the popularity of the sweater grew. People wanted more designs, more choices in colors and more difference in the weight of the yarn – this led to the yarn factories producing a huge range of colors and weights like the ones that are offered today.³⁷ The natural colors of the sheep still remain popular, especially when a more traditional look is wanted, as we can see from designers like Farmer's Market and Geysir, who use traditional colors as part of their look.

It is thought that even though the lopapeysa itself is not an original creation, some of the patterns used in the yoke and cuffs are indeed based on traditional Icelandic patterns. As Elsa E. Guðjónsson said about the pattern's development:

Some [of the patterns] are traditional Icelandic patterns [...] gotten from old witness books or from older handwork. Some [of the patterns] have been adapted after Icelandic or foreign patterns or other charted embroidery patterns used for other types of textile creation.³⁸

According to Gudrun Helgadóttir, the old patterns were incorporated in the lopapeysa mainly in an effort of raising a sense of nationality during the financially hard times, an effect that has happened in many countries before Iceland: people tend to turn to traditional values and crafts in time of distress.³⁹

Decorative patterns, however, have been a big part of Icelandic handcraft tradition for centuries. All in all, there are 10 pattern books, also known as *sjónabók*, that have been preserved in the National museum, the oldest one dating all the way back to 17th century.

³⁶ Guðrun, "Nation in a sheep's coat", 64.

³⁷ Magnús, Ull verður gull, 97.

³⁸ Magnús, Ull verður gull, 97.

³⁹ Guðrun, "Nation in a sheep's coat", 61.

The patterns in the book have been used in embroidery, weaving and others forms of needlework.⁴⁰ These patterns have since been recreated in a joint effort by The National Museum of Iceland, The Handcraft Association of Iceland and Iceland Academy of the Arts in one comprehensive pattern book, titled *Sjónabók*. The book was created to serve as inspiration for creative and hand craft people of Iceland, who could use it freely to draw inspiration and rekindle the connection to Icelandic traditions.⁴¹

One element that keeps coming up in Icelandic sweaters and its Scandinavian counterparts is the eight-petaled rose (*áttablaðarós*), or sometimes referred to as a snowflake or a star. This pattern has been around since the 17th century and appears many times in the *Sjónabók*, and is considered to be very Icelandic, also due to the fact that all of the rune alphabet can fit into the frames of this rose pattern (Image 10).

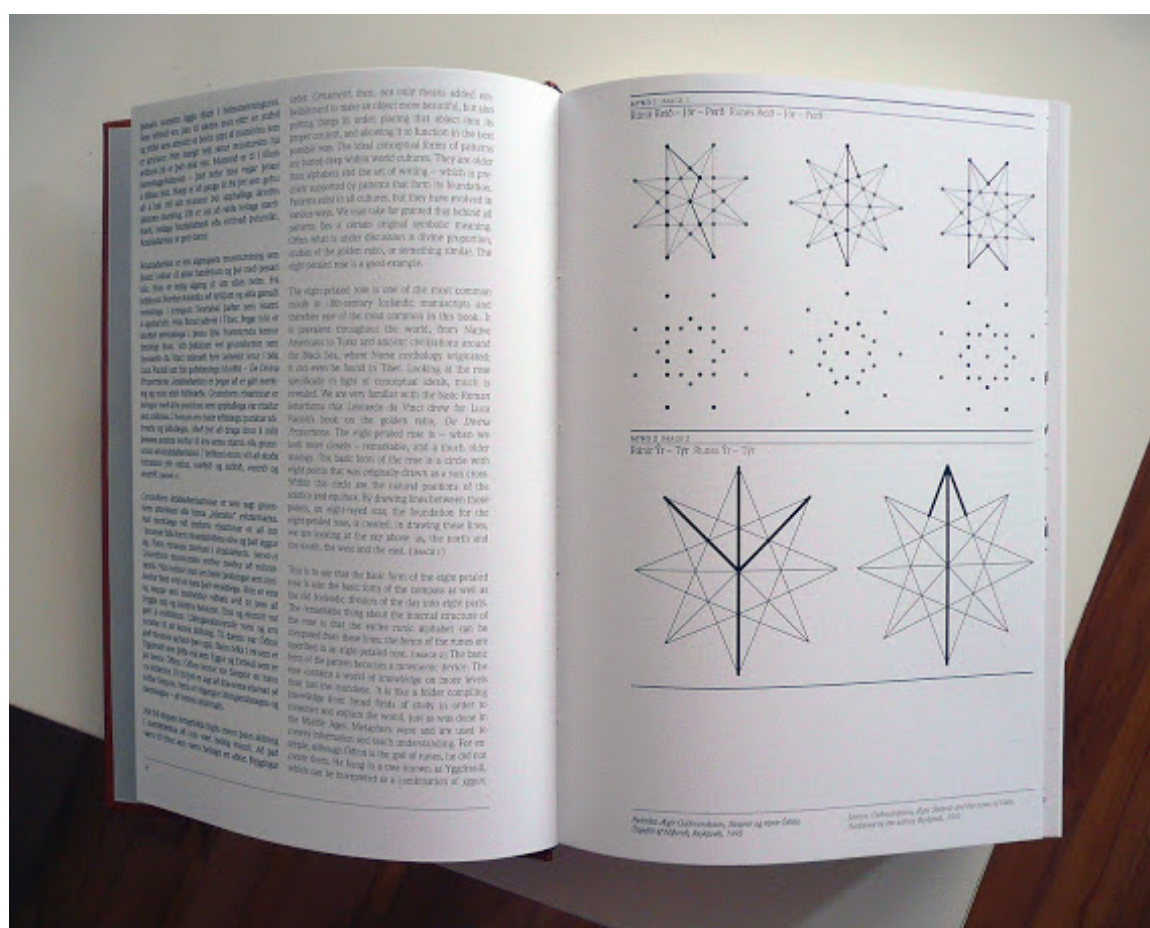


Image 10: The rune alphabet set inside the *áttablaðarós*.

⁴⁰ *Íslensk Sjónabók – Ornaments and Patterns Found in Iceland* (Reykjavík: Heimilisiðnaðarfélag Íslands, 2009), 29.

⁴¹ *Sjónabók*, 9.

Similar figures have been also used all over Scandinavia and around the world.⁴² Over the years, this figure has had appearances in Norway, Denmark, Finland and even Estonia, where it has been used in various knitting and needlework.⁴³ The rose has kept its popularity, and since its first appearance in lopapeysa designs it has been recreated many times (Image 11).

The practice of republishing patterns from old designs is a very common one in the knitting industry in Iceland: Istex regularly publishes new versions of old lopapeysa patterns. The designs hold their popularity but the patterns need tweaking for modern consumer, both in the language and the imagery. This also keeps the “traditional” patterns alive with modern knitters and old patterns in regular use.



Image 11: "Álafoss" sweater pattern, old and new version.

⁴² *Sjónabók*, 10.

⁴³ Vibeke Lind, *Knitting in the Nordic Tradition* (Courier Corporation, 2014), 61.

4.2 Designing the patterns

When designing a knitted item, a number of things has to be taken into account: the shape of the garment, the weight and type of yarn used and the size of the needles. Deborah Newton describes the design of knitted items in her book “Designing Knitwear”:

What makes designing knitwear different from designing other clothing is the nature of the fabric itself. Knitted fabrics generally have more stretch than woven fabrics, a characteristic that you can subdue or enhance by your choice of yarn, needle size and pattern.⁴⁴

In the case of lopapeysa, one must take into consideration the type of lopi used and the fact that the sweater is knitted in a circle, which means there is no seaming (except for crafting the underarms). Lopi has many different weights that all bring a different result. The finer the yarn, the more detail the knitter can go into when designing the pattern, whereas the bulkier the yarn, the more simplified the pattern must be. A great tool in designing the patterns is a specifically proportioned knitting graph paper – the paper’s chart is designed to give the designer a graph that reflects the results of the finished knitted pattern realistically, so the chart’s boxes are more flat than regular charts (Image 12).⁴⁵ The knitter must first decide how many stitches the sweater has in order to draw up the graph, and this task requires choosing the yarn. The popular use of the types of lopi goes as such: Bulkylopi is used mainly in one colored knitting due to its thickness; Álafósslopi is used for outdoor sweaters with simple patterns; Léttlopi is used for inside sweaters with more complex patterns; and Einband is used for fine, lace-like garments and elaborate patterns.⁴⁶



Image 12: Knitting graph paper.

⁴⁴ Deborah Newton, *Designing Knitwear* (The Taunton Press, 1992,) 6.

⁴⁵ Purl Soho, “Fair Isle: Design Your Own,” June 26, 2008, <https://www.purlsoho.com/create/2008/06/26/fair-isle-design-your-own/>.

⁴⁶ “The Icelandic Wool.”

Since the lopapeysa has a circular yoke, the decreases of the yoke are made evenly throughout the yoke's pattern. A circular yoke creates a great opportunity to have decorative decreases, and it is very easy to "hide" the decreases within the yoke pattern.⁴⁷ When designing a lopapeysa pattern, the designer must take into consideration how the pattern plays out with the decreases. The pattern must have the biggest elements in the bottom, since the decreasing starts only a little bit after the sleeves have been attached to the body. Older patterns have usually longer yoke patterns, which lead them to be more baggy and unfitting – the pattern we're inspecting here (Image 13) is a more modern one, only incorporating the yoke pattern, leaving out the lower patterns. As you can see from figure 16, the structure of the yoke pattern is triangular: the charts reflect the decreases by taking the decreased stitches out of the picture. The knitter then only knits the colored parts, leaving the gaps in the pattern unknt. The result is a beautiful yoke with no visible decreases, and a pattern that gets smaller and smaller towards the end, due to the decreasing amount of stitches.



Image 13: Pattern for "Aftur", Istex.com

⁴⁷ Lynnae, "Sweater Construction Methods: Circular Yoke."

There are many ways a knitter can design their own patterns. Where professional designers might use advanced computer programs to calculate the pattern, a beginning knit designer like myself might use a pen and paper. It is easy enough to use existing patterns as a base for your own designs, starting off by making simple changes in the shapes and colors. When designing a completely original design, however, one must use more time in calculating the right gauge and swatching (knitting a test piece) their yarn. This can be a frustrating process of trial and error; I myself have had to undo my work many times when trying out an original design.

Nowadays the common knitter has a simpler tool at hand: the website knittingpatterns.is provides a free program to design a lopapeysa pattern, try out colors and even print out a ready calculated pattern of your own design (Image 14). The website was created by a fisherman from Isafjörður called Sverrir, he developed the program first for his wife and family to help them design sweaters easily, and now knitters around the world are using the website.⁴⁸ On the website the user can choose what size they want their lopapeysa to be, either by common clothing sizes or by their own measurements. The website has all the colors of lopi available and the 3D model of the sweater makes it easy to look at the sweater from all angles.



Image 14: Screenshot of knittingpatterns.is.

⁴⁸ "About," Knittingpatterns.is, accessed November 12, 2016, <https://prjonamunstur.wordpress.com/about/>.

5 Modern adaptations and social media

Fashion has a way of recycling traditions and taking influence from popular garments around the world. After the financial crisis of 2008 the Icelandic designers got inspired by traditional handcrafts and used them in their designs more than ever. As an effort of national reassurance, and a response to the booming tourist industry, the designers re-emerged the national sweater in fashion lines, and suddenly the lopapeysa enjoyed a “second wave” of popularity.⁴⁹ All the big brands had it: Farmers Market, Geysir, Icewear – the sweater design was even put into t-shirts and napkins. Some recreations kept the traditional feel of the sweater like the lopapeysa from Geysir’s 2016 fall line (Image 15). Although handmade from lopi, this sweater was still mass produced abroad, according to the sweater’s tags. Some designers took the lopapeysa as an influence without taking it literally: like the “Tjörn” cardigan by Farmers Market, with its detail from a lopapeysa pattern enlarged (Image 16). The lopapeysa has also been adapted internationally to mainstream fashion, for examples on the shelves of H&M and GAP.⁵⁰ The designs used in these global brands are clearly inspired by the lopapeysa, but the materials are fitted for the consumer by using synthetic fibers and machine production.



Image 15: Lopapeysa by Geysir.



Image 16: Tjörn cardigan by Farmer's Market.

⁴⁹ Bertram, “Power patterns.”

⁵⁰ Bertram, “Power patterns.”

Iceland has not been alone in the steady rise of popularity in handicrafts: Raverly, a social media and sharing platform for knitters to sell and buy patterns, has gathered users from all over the world, and has steadily become one of the biggest social media platforms for knitters worldwide. In Raverly, the user can track their projects and follow other knitters, share their designs for free or sell and buy them.⁵¹ Everyone can become a knit designer and share their designs freely: people from all over the world, not just in Iceland, have taken traditional garments and interpreted them in new ways, and the lopapeysa is no exception. One of these new design collections is the 2016 published pattern book “Modern Lopi”, by an ex-cop turned knit designer Lars Rains. In his book, Rains pushes the boundaries of the concept of lopapeysa by experimenting with shapes and colors, resulting in new interesting sweater patterns (Image 17). Rains describes his color inspiration in an interview:

There are so many bright colors to choose from with this yarn (lopi), but they weren’t often well represented in the more traditional designs. It’s a challenge for me to try to combine vivid colors which really shouldn’t work together, but somehow I manage to find a way to make it work.⁵²



Image 17: “Hildur” by Lars Rains from the book “Modern Lopi”

⁵¹ “About Us,” Raverly, accessed November 28, 2016, <http://www.ravelry.com/about>.

⁵² “Lars Rains, Modern Lopi and a Giveaway,” *Tanis Knits*, February 3, 2016, <https://tanisknits.com/2016/02/03/lars-rains-modern-lopi-a-giveaway/>.

Another sharing platform, surprisingly enough, is the social media king Facebook. Groups for knitters are being made constantly, rising in popularity not only amongst people who knit themselves, but with potential buyers who want to skip the middle hand and buy the sweaters from the knitter themselves. One of the biggest groups for knitters in Iceland is *Handóðir prjónarar* (Mad knitters), a group of almost 19 000 knitters. In this group, members post pictures of their finished projects daily, engaging in discussion about current trends and new knitting patterns. Many of the people in this group are experienced knitters who come up with their own designs: some inspired by traditional patterns, some by pop culture. Practically anything can be made into a lopapeysa pattern: superheroes, puffins, horses, tractors – since the second wave, the options in lopapeysa patterns have grown enormously, partly through the use of social media.

The lopapeysa's rise of popularity also showed up as a trend amongst young people: the lopapeysa has become almost a uniform for Icelanders, and this can be seen especially with people attending the annual Þjóðhátíð festival in Vestmanneyjar, where people would dress up in sweaters made by their family, often knit for the very occasion (Image 18).



Image 18: Me and my friends in Þjóðhátíð 2015, all wearing lopapeysas.

In a world of industrialization, the lopapeysa has managed to survive as a somewhat genuine handmade item. Whenever the question of what makes a sweater Icelandic, the answer includes without a doubt at least this one attribute: lopapeysa is always handmade. Why is it that lopapeysa hasn't gotten the fate of machine production like its Nordic counterparts, or at least not in that scale, but insists on being popular despite the fact that buying hand knit items is expensive? Shirley Paden explains her point of view in how handmade knitwear keeps on living:

Why do I want to make clothing out of string and two sticks when I could easily buy commercially knitted garments? The logic escaped everyone else; sometimes even me. I realized that what captivated me was the way hand knitted clothing continues to survive and how it ignites a creative spirit in every culture on earth.⁵³

With the sweater's growing popularity and production, the question arises: when does the sweater stop being Icelandic? Many people define an Icelandic sweater by its material: it has to be knit from lopi. But what about the technique, the build of the sweater and the pattern? The knitters in Iceland's largest knitting group in Facebook, *Handóðir prjónarar*, were asked these very same questions, and among the discussion one thing rose above other: the sweater has to be knit from lopi (Image 19). This of course clashed with the views of Icelandic knitters living abroad, not being able to access lopi; would their sweaters still be called Icelandic?

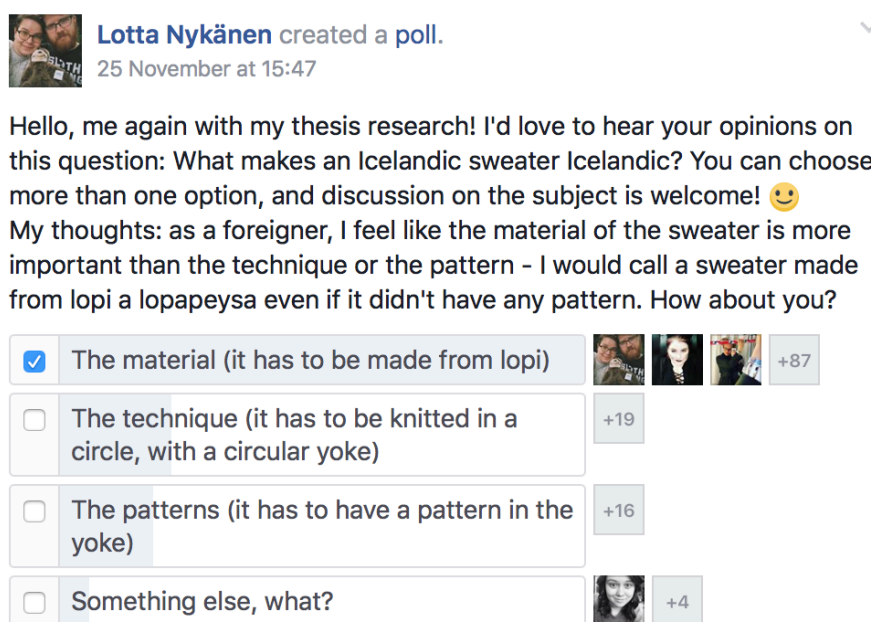


Image 19: Poll in the Facebook group "Handóðir prjónarar".

⁵³ Shirley Pade, *Knitwear Design Workshop: A Comprehensive Guide To Handknits* (Loveland: Interweave Press LLC, 2009,) 7.

A good way to realize what a lopapeysa definitely is not, is to examine how it has been used as a marketing tool by commercial clothing brands. Cultural appropriation is a rather rare phenomenon in Northern Europe, but one of the examples of this is the article “Knitwear and cultural relativism” by Kate Davies, where Davies examines the online shop “Toast” with their “Icelandic Fair Isle Sweater” (Image 20). The shop describes the sweater as a “Icelandic traditional fair isle sweater made from Irish tweed”, when in fact, like Davies points out, all of these things point to different knitting traditions from different countries.⁵⁴ Not only is fair isle a completely different knitting technique to the one used in Iceland, but it would never be knitted with Irish tweed, and as we can see from the sweater’s construction, the yoke is not knitted in a circle like the Icelandic lopapeysa. So in the case of this sweater, the word “Icelandic” is being used purely for the marketing effect it has, creating a feeling that the item is “authentic” and “traditional”.

It is easy enough to see that this sweater is not Icelandic, even though it has clearly been inspired by Icelandic patterns. The structure and the material is wrong: the sweater in question does not have a round yoke, and uses Irish tweed instead of Icelandic wool. So the three main attributes remain: structure, material and pattern; do these factors define a true Icelandic sweater?

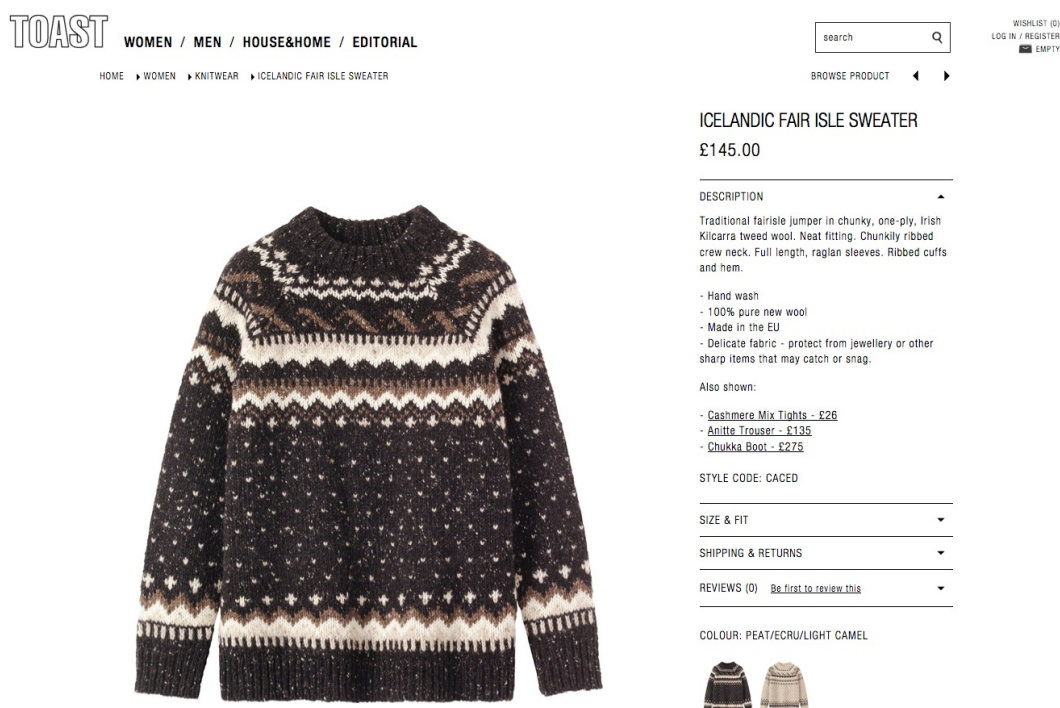


Image 20: "Icelandic fair isle sweater" in the article "Knitting and cultural relativism" by Kate Davies.

⁵⁴ Davies, “Knitwear and Cultural Relativism.”

6 Conclusions

When I started this research, I was sure I knew exactly the right way to define a lopapeysa. “A round yoked sweater with a traditional pattern across the shoulders, made from Icelandic wool.” In my mind, the patterns were the defining factor of the lopapeysa – after all they were best recognized from them.

Through this research I’ve read a number of articles, blog posts, books and discussion online, in order to find out how much significance the patterns indeed hold when talking about the lopapeysa. As we can see from the chapters above, other Nordic countries have indeed played an important role in influencing the sweater’s patterns, but Iceland has managed to incorporate also its own traditions in the designs. Just like other clothing, the lopapeysa has also proven to be living with the fashion and trends that surround it: the patterns have evolved with times, morphing from Nordic patterns into modern interpretations. So if the patterns can be so versatile, and the sweaters are still defined as “lopapeysa”, the sweater is clearly more about the material than the pattern.

This led me to think about my own career in knitting Icelandic sweaters. Were they in fact not Icelandic at all? The first lopapeysa I knitted was made in Finland, from Finnish wool, by a Finnish person. The only thing Icelandic in the sweater is the pattern – so maybe it wasn’t a lopapeysa after all. I have since corrected this error: after moving to Iceland I have knit many Icelandic sweaters with the proper tools, proper patterns and the proper yarn; they were even made in Iceland. But is the pattern not enough to make it a lopapeysa, if the knitter is not Icelandic? Where does the definition truly lie? To find a final answer for these questions, one might have to go deeper into cultural research, with more polls and interviews.

The research method I chose for this thesis was sufficient enough for researching the history and development of the sweater, but the further into the modern day I went, the less information I could find. Using social media as a source came to me late in the writing process, and maybe if I had come up with it earlier I could’ve gone deeper into doing surveys and extensive interviews from knitters themselves.

Even though through this research I've come to see the lopapeysa as a young invention, mostly borrowed from the neighboring nations, it seems to me it is the material that makes the sweater traditional. Lopi and the sheep it comes from are defining Icelanders as a nation in such a manner that the lopapeysa has managed to gather a reputation as a national garment within a short period of time. So it seems that even though the patterns are held dear and have traditional values, lopi itself gives the lopapeysa the "it" factor. But still, the greatest impact that the sweater has had, in my opinion, is the impact it had in the Icelanders who make them: keeping up knitting tradition and inspiring knitters to pursue their own designs seems to be a unique effect in Iceland.

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