

CULTURE

Getting Through a Pandemic With Old-Fashioned Crafts

Like many others in these times, I've turned to arts such as crochet and knitting to make sense of the chaos around me.

By Rosa Inocencio Smith



Mondadori / Getty

APRIL 1, 2020

SHARE ▾

If the new coronavirus sends us back, somehow, to olden times, I'll be prepared not with fresh-caught food and firewood, but with doilies. I've been crocheting them, obsessively, when I don't know what else to do. Two weeks ago, as the first cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in my hometown, I began a circular floral pattern in a thin, wine-colored cord. By the time my office shut down, I'd made hundreds of tight, tiny stitches, and my wrist ached; events were canceled one by one, and I switched to

using a larger hook. Supermarket shelves emptied, and I made the back panel of a black cotton sweater. My uncle had symptoms but couldn't get tested, and I ran out of black yarn.

I've turned to old-fashioned crafts in recent weeks to calm my anxieties, to hold something tangible in my hands and my thoughts while uncertainty swirls around me. I don't know how long the pandemic will last; whether the food I've stocked is too much or too little; whether I'll help my community more by stepping up or by simply staying home. In the long chain of actions and accidents that can lead to a stranger's life or death, I don't know where I fit or whether I'm doing the right thing. But I know how to do this; I know how to link one loop of thread into another. I know I can unravel my work and start over if I do it wrong.

To spend a pandemic making soft and pretty things may seem silly in certain ways—frivolous or impractical, maybe, and certainly a privilege when my life and livelihood aren't (yet) directly at stake. Handicrafts such as crochet, knitting, and embroidery—traditionally practiced by women and by the elderly—carry passive associations that defy most American notions of bravery. I think of Jo March, the heroine from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, lamenting that she can't fight for the Union Army in the Civil War but must “stay home and knit, like a poky old woman.” And yet that dismissal belies the quiet strengths embedded in every stitch. Counting the movements of hooks and needles, row after row, over the hours or days it takes to complete a project, requires patience, focus, and persistence. And these cognitive skills—to say nothing of the proven mental-health benefits of crafting—are just the ones needed to weather a disaster that's defined by waiting.

[Read: Tedious cooking is the best distraction during a pandemic](#)

That might explain why, aside from material need, needle arts appear throughout history as responses to collective trauma. After all, even the “blue army sock” that Jo

shakes in frustration is destined for the war effort, an allusion to real mass donations of hand-knitted stockings in both the North and South. In Ireland, during the famine of the 1840s, philanthropists across the country established crochet schools; they trained impoverished farming families to make lace for export in a relief scheme that grew into an art form.



Women knit and talk while waiting out a 1940 bomb attack in a London tube station. (AP)

During World War I, French peasant women with their homes under fire cross-stitched military scenes that were sold as part of another fundraising effort. When the war ended, shell-shocked soldiers were prescribed embroidery therapy. World War II brought a "Victory Knitting" campaign to aid service members and refugees, during which the Red Cross published patterns of mitts for riflemen and stump covers for amputees. In London, people sheltering from the blitz were encouraged to pass the time by knitting. In photographs from the time, women knit in air-raid bunkers and apartment buildings and on ambulance running boards, side by side in even rows like the stitches made by their own needles.

Those scenes of companionship, of course, are unthinkable in a time of social distancing. The risk of transmitting the virus complicates donation campaigns, and has led some organizations to stop accepting scarves, blankets, and other handmade goods. Even so, crafting remains a communal activity. Volunteers across the U.S. are sewing masks for health-care workers, and more and more hospitals are seeking these donations to mitigate shortages. Many others have turned, like me, to yarn crafts as a form of stress relief, hoping to lose themselves in a simple, repetitive activity or to

make the most of their time in quarantine by learning a new skill. As the founders of the Madrid-based company We Are Knitters explained [in a recent Q&A](#), “Knitting keeps your mind occupied ... it also improves your self-esteem when you realize that you are able to create something with your own hands.”



You can learn, too. The internet abounds with [tutorials](#) and [free patterns](#). All you need are the materials for whatever medium you choose: needle and thread, crochet hook and yarn. You can find inspiration online, in the loosely woven communities of [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) users sheltering in place with their craft supplies. Their photos, under hashtags such as [#quarantinecrafts](#) and [#coronacrafts](#), show [elaborate crochet shawls](#) and [tentative first rows of knitting](#), [soft felt creatures](#) and [blossoming flowers](#), and [public-health samplers](#): “[Wash Your Damn Hands](#).”

Above all, they show creation. To crochet, or to knit, or to block out an image in cross-stitch or needlepoint, is both to make something and to make sense of it, turning a slack piece of string into something with recognizable function and form. All of us amateur crafters alone in our rooms are filling our empty spaces, each shaping a single tenuous strand into something with strength and body. We are making something lasting out of solitude.
