

The 1930s Hand-Knitted Bathing Suit: Cost, originality and adaptation

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Figure 1 Front View. Hand-knitted bathing suit. c.1930s Wool. Orange, green and white striped bodice with halter strap and low back. Navy shorts and modesty skirt. Button fastenings for straps. Worthing Art Gallery and Museum. Accession number: 1981-380.

*Active preparation for the swimming season is occupying many an otherwise lazy person. I find that all the female world is knitting its own bathing dress or swimming costume...Knitting needles and coloured wools abound and it appears that everyone will go down to the sea in stripes this year.*¹

It is serendipitous that *Worthing Herald* reported such a mass enthusiasm for handmade bathing suits in 1931, as Worthing Museum holds an exemplary hand-knitted bathing suit from the same decade [Figure 1]. This telling object shows the maker's design decisions and provides insights into why such garments were made in this period.

Swimming and sunbathing at the beach were relatively low cost leisure for the people of Worthing, with the beach on their doorstep. The purchase of swimwear, however, could be a financial burden. For instance, a Jantzen swimsuit in 1936 [Figure 2] cost between 15 shillings for the basic swimsuit with a rounded neckline and 42 shillings for a fancier suit with modesty skirt, 'moulded fit' and halter neck design. Even a young wage-earner, without responsibility for a household budget, would not have been able to afford such a swimsuit. For example, Olive Masterson, a young factory worker in the 1930s, who worked for Cox's Pill company on Upper Lewes Road, Brighton, recorded in her memoir that she had only had 9 shillings as her disposable income each week; young local working-class women, therefore, would not have been able to afford a ready-to-wear item that would only be worn occasionally.² The British swimwear market in the interwar period was thus split between those that could afford a machine-made suit and working-class consumers who would only be able to make an off-the-shelf purchase through clothing clubs that allowed the purchase of moderately expensive goods to be paid in weekly instalments. Another alternative was for women to make their own.³ Knitting a swimsuit at home was a great deal cheaper than buying one ready-made, with yarn priced at 5 pence per ounce of wool.⁴ Clearly, the high prices of bathing suits in department stores have a bearing on why hand-knitted bathing suits were made in the 1930s. The bathing suit in Worthing Museum's

¹ "Down to the sea in stripes." *The Worthing Herald*. 9th May 1931. Page 10.

² Olive Masterson, *The Circle of Life* (Brighton: Queenspark Books, 1936) 37-38.

³ Sarah Norris, "Mass Observation At the Dance Hall: A Democracy of Fashion?" *Recording Leisure Lives: Histories, Archives and Memories of Leisure in 20th Century Britain*, Ed. Robert Snape and Helen Pussard (Eastbourne: Leisure Studies Association, 2009)94

⁴ "Crocus Wool Advertisement," *North Devon Journal*, 21st April 1938, front page.

The knitting pattern for the bathing suit under scrutiny would have either been produced by a wool manufacturer, such as Wolsey, Patons and Milady, or supplied in a women's magazine. Often these choices would be the same price – both were two pence - but the magazine option would often be favoured as it provided fiction to read as well as a useful knitting pattern.⁵ The precise pattern for the suit has not yet been found, however, a 1936 pattern for a child's bathing suit [Figure 3] is very similar in its design, with a block colour for the shorts and a halter strap that buttons at the back. This shows the popularity of this kind of design at the time, and the maker of the Worthing Museum swimsuit may have used or adapted a similar pattern. Although the maker and knitting pattern is unknown, the maker's design decisions are evident within the garment.



⁵ Fiona Hackney, "Making Modern Women, Stitch by Stitch: Dressmaking and Women's Magazines in Britain 1919-39," *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking*, Barbara Burman, ed (Oxford: Berg, 1997) 77.

SUN-SUIT!

It will solve the dress problem for your three-to-four-year-old on hot days

but dec. 1 st. at beg. and end of every row until all sts. are cast off. Press work on both sides with a warm iron and damp cloth. Sew up side seams, then sew up leg seams. Now work 1 row of d.c. with blue wool round the white edges. Sew on the buttons at each side of back. Sew on straps to the point of front, cross at the back and fasten over buttons. Press seams. Tack the anchor transfer at the centre front and work over it with navy blue wool in chain st. Work the rope in red.

THE COAT

CAST on 96 sts. for the back on No. 12 needles and work 1 inch in k. 1, p. 1 rib. Change to st.-st. and cont. until the

An anchor and lanyard worked in colours make this little suit look very gay—and see what a trim little back it has

Cast on 48 sts. for the right front and work this to match the left, remembering to work ribbed border at the beg. of a k. row instead of the end, and to start the front slope dec. at the beg. of a k. row instead of the end, and the armhole shaping at the beg. of a p. row instead of a k. row.

Cast on 12 sts. for each sleeve and inc. 1 st. at beg. and end of every row until you have 64 sts. Then cont. in st.-st. without inc. until the sleeve measures 3 inches, finishing after a p. row. Now change to white wool. Reverse knitting for cuff as follows:
Next row—P.
Next row—K. Cont. in st.-st. for 1 inch. Cast off.

Cast on 90 sts. for the collar in white and work in st.-st. for 4 inches, finishing after a p. row. Now change for neck. K. 20 sts. &

work measures 7 inches from the beg., finishing after a p. row. Now change for neck. K. 20 sts. &




Figure 3 "Such a Jolly Sun-Suit." *Woman's Own*. June 13th 1936. Page 355.

The first evidence of the maker's decisions in the bathing suit is in the choice of wool colours. The bathing suit has a navy blue modesty skirt with shorts underneath and a halter-neck bodice in diagonal stripes of orange, blue and white. The *Swimming and Bathing Pool Review* in 1936 contended that 'hand-knitted costumes are very popular indeed and will be more so this season, as the modern girl is demanding more variety of style and colour'.⁶ The hand-knitted bathing suit allows the maker to create an original garment in terms of the colour combinations that can be knitted into designs. Hand-knitted bathing suits have an infinite number of colour combinations, unlike shop-bought suits, which would often only have plain or striped designs available in a small range of colours each year. Although it is probable that Worthing Museum's bathing suit was made using a professionally designed pattern from a magazine and the maker may have followed the pattern's suggested colours, the garment shows how hand-knitted bathing suits could provide variety in design and originality of expression, unlike shop-bought versions.

Another decision the maker has made for the making of the bathing suit is in the inclusion of a modesty skirt. Jantzen catalogues show bathing suit designs that were sold with the modesty skirt as an option, making its presence reflective of the preference of the wearer. The bathing suit in Worthing Museum has a modesty skirt with knitted shorts attached underneath. This feature derives from early bathing dress of the 1860s, which required ankle length bloomers to be worn underneath in order for the body to be covered and thus remain decent by contemporary standards whilst in and out of the water.⁷ Although bathing garments became more fitted and revealed more skin by the 1930s, this design feature remained. With homemade suits, the inclusion of a modesty skirt was the maker's choice but knitting a modesty skirt for a homemade bathing suit would have required extra wool and more time spent knitting.

Another way that the design of the suit provides useful information about craft and bathing practices of the period is in the way that its structure reveals attempts to resolve the issues connected with woollen bathing suits. The suit has neck straps that are buttoned into place

⁶ "Water-Ladies: Swim and Sun Fashion review conducted by Milady," *Swimming and Bathing Pool Review* 3.1 May 1936, page 11-12.

⁷ Avril Landell, *History in Camera: Seaside Fashions 1860-1939* (Buckinghamshire: Shire Publications Ltd, 1983) 30.

at the back [Figure 4]. The garment is undoubtedly a 'sun suit', in the language of the period, as it includes a low back feature that would have enabled more skin to be tanned and the straps could be unbuttoned to avoid an uneven tan. However, the maker has chosen to add an extra strap that buttons into place at the middle of the back. This addition suggests that the maker may have wanted the suit to be more modest or perhaps wanted to make it more suitable for swimming in the sea. The strap would reduce sagging at the bodice when the woollen garment became wet. This is not a method widely used in knitting patterns of the period. Patterns from women's magazines tended to favour a design feature that allowed long straps, to be either tied around the neck or threaded through a bone ring and tied at the front as a method for creating a suit adaptable for both sun and sea leisure. Therefore, the maker seems to have been aware that homemade knitted bathing suits had design problems and attempted to make a suit that would both look good and deal with the issues that would inevitably face the wearer.



Figure 2 Back View of Hand-knitted bathing suit. c.1930s Wool. Orange, green and white striped bodice with halter strap and low back. Navy shorts and modesty skirt. Button fastenings for straps. Worthing Art Gallery and Museum. Accession number: 1981-380.

This hand-knitted bathing suit is one of many homemade dress examples that Worthing Museum holds. Cheryl Buckley argues that such items 'as designed objects...are "unspeakably meaningful", yet undervalued by historians.'⁸ The bathing suit is a humble garment, made in the home, with cheap materials, and with no named designer. Despite this, it not only informs us of changing patterns in beachwear design but also of local history, craft practice and of working class fashion. It is important that such items are collected by museums, particularly as knitted garments tend to have a low survival rate. They could sometimes be unravelled by their owners who might wish to reuse the yarn for other garments, and over time the wool may also become damaged by moths if not looked after properly.⁹ Some museums might reject such a garment for its humble and handmade condition, but Worthing Museum's acceptance of such items within their collection, some fifty years after its production, allows ordinary women's lives to be remembered through their dress.

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⁸ Cheryl Buckley, "On the Margins: Theorising the History and Significance of Making and Designing Clothes at Home," *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking*, Barbara Burman, ed (Oxford: Berg, 1997) 58.

⁹ Cally Blackman, "Hand Knitting in Britain from 1908-39: The Work of Marjory Tillotson," *Textile History* 29.2 (1998):178.

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