

ExilAktion

Protecting the Rights of Minors in Exile



Making a difference - short history of knitting

Knitting, as well as other handcrafted activities, may not have world-changing effects, but they can change the lives of individuals. History shows us that this is possible. When ExilAktion got the idea to create an atelier for the women belonging to its community, it was inspired by such activities.

These women, who are living in exile in Switzerland, come from war zones and other places where human rights are violated. Some have developed post-traumatic stress disorders, depression and anxiety and many are suffering from poor self-esteem and lack of trust in their own abilities, despite being skilled in various handicrafts. It is our belief that we can help make these women happier, healthier and more active in the shaping of their lives, simply by making beautiful articles together, while inspiring and encouraging each other with creative ideas and mutual praise. Helping to support the whole community of ExilAktion through the modest revenue that the sale of these articles is producing, gives an additional importance to the women and their work.

Having chosen handicraft as a life-quality promoting tool, let's look at its importance throughout history, taking the example of knitting. Knitting is a technique that can be used by all, it's easily accessible and can produce fabrics that protect against the elements of rain, snow, wind and sun. Using natural products to meet basic needs has made knitting invaluable to people over the centuries throughout the world. There is no proof of exactly when and how people began knitting; all we know is that once it happened, it became an integral part of human life. The word knit was only introduced in the Oxford Unabridged English Dictionary in the 15th century, but we know that knitting-like techniques existed as early as 6500 BC.

Knitting has also historically been a powerful political tool. There are many examples, here mentioning only two:

In order to prevent the colonies from gaining economic power through wool production and manufacturing, London passed the Wool Act in 1699, which prohibited the colonies from exporting wool, forcing them to import English wool fabrics, which were heavily taxed and expensive. The response of the American colonies was to seek self-sufficiency by boycotting English wool. This was not an easy task since they did not have the industrial machinery to spin and weave and they also lacked the commercial infrastructure and know-how of the English. But they had the wool and almost every household had a traditional spinning wheel. They also had plenty of women knowing how to spin, knit and weave. While men loudly discussed insurrection, rebellion and even war, women took on the David and Goliath contest of challenging the British industry in their usual quiet and unglamorous way.

The second example of a knitting action that brought about important changes was during the First World War. Women began knitting warm garments to protect the soldiers, who were ill equipped in the cold trenches due to the British government's lack of preparation. This spontaneous knitting resulted in colourful items. Women used what they had at home, unravelling and reknitting, using ends of yarn that could be found, which clashed with the otherwise disciplined look of the soldiers' uniforms (imagine them paired with yellow and red socks, blue balaclavas and striped scarfs). The government didn't look favourably on this spontaneous knitting activity, which they saw as an anarchistic grassroot movement, and it therefore brought army knitting under the control of the Crown. Women were engaged to knit garments following strict patterns and using wool in prescribed green and grey shades that was provided by the state. Any imagination or creativity was momentarily killed, but at least it protected the soldiers against the cold and paid the women for their work.

But imagination and creativity cannot be hindered in the long run. Since knitting is closely connected to life itself, not only for survival, but also as an expression of who we are or want to be, there will often be an element of politics connected to it. A modern example of this is the craftivism movement, which is an expression against mass consumerism and waste. Knitting is one such instrument in promoting a more sustainable way of living.

Although being non-political, since the aim of the ExilAktion atelier is not going beyond the group and the individuals belonging to it, many of the values expressed by such movements are still relevant. The promotion of creativity, showing others that we exist and matter, and working for a better quality of life: these are some of the examples that we also can subscribe to.