

Aran Sampler Learn-Along

Here's a bit of history and background information on Aran knitting, including stitch patterns.

Aran sweaters (or Geanai Arran in Gaelic) were the work sweaters (or jumpers, as they're traditionally called) of the farmers and fishermen that populated the Aran Islands situated off the west coast of Ireland. Aran sweaters are also often times known as cable-knit sweaters and Aran Isle sweaters.

The three islands (Inishmore, Inishmann and Inisheer) are the western-most point of Ireland located at the mouth of the Galway Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. While these garments are similar to Ganseys in that they were knit for the fishermen of the region, they are distinct and traditionally more ornate.

Traditionally, Aran sweaters were knit by hand from naturally colored yarns that were hand-spun from unwashed sheep's wool. Not washing the wool before spinning it into yarn allowed the fiber to retain its natural lanolin, a waxy substance often used for water-proofing. This makes the wool water-resistant. In fact, it can absorb 30% of its weight in water before beginning to feel wet. Because of all the air pockets in wool, it is very insulating, so it keeps the wearer warm in cold weather while still preventing overheating. The combination of wicking and insulating help to maintain the perfect body temperature. These attributes, in addition to wool's natural breathability, made it the perfect fiber for both farmers and fishermen.

Native Irish sheep provide Irish wool. The wool taken straight off a sheep is known as "greasy wool" or "wool in grease." It can be coarse, and some find this type of wool itchy to wear.

Merino sheep of New Zealand is where merino wool comes from. It is finer and contains smaller fibers than rougher wools, so it is not only softer and more flexible but shouldn't be itchy against the skin. One of the advantages of merino wool is that it often only needs a simple airing between wearing to allow the fibers to breathe before it can be worn again.

Aran wool is the midway between DK and Chunky, and is medium weight. Aran wool is the perfect yarn for thicker jumpers or cardigans without being too bulky and for warm autumn and winter accessories, such as oversized scarves and snuggly hats, mitts, and cowls.

Traditional woolen Aran wools often have multiple plies (sometimes as many as six or eight strands), which creates a really round yarn making it extremely popular for its ability to produce fantastic stitch definition for cables, moss stitch, and other textured pattern effects.

The stitches that create the Aran knitting patterns are often fairly complex, and the completed items are time-consuming to create. You use one solid color of yarn and essentially make patterns and cables by using a variety of stitches and needle techniques. A typical adult Aran sweater will have over 100,000 stitches and may take

several months to finish. One of the most distinctive characteristics of Aran sweaters is their patterning. The stitch patterns cover the entire sweater, including the back and sleeves.

It is believed that the three-dimensional effect of the twisted stitches used in the patterns increases the warmth of the clothing by creating air pockets, and is the reason it is so popular in colder climates.

The trick to Aran knitting is that you want the **patterns** you knit to stand out – not the yarn itself like in many other knitting projects. You do not want to use a yarn with a lot of fluff or extra bulk to it. Stick to the easier yarns for your first couple of projects, and then branch out from there into the more creative yarns and fibers if you so desire.

Traditionally, an Aran sweater is made from undyed cream-colored bainin (pronounced "bawneen") yarn. When you're putting so much time and effort in to creating a garment, go with the best quality yarn you can afford. Invest in a single-color good quality wool or cotton for your project, but if it's your first time, go with a cheaper alternative until you are confident in your Aran knitting skills.

To make a garment using Aran knitting, you will need traditional knitting needles and a cable needle, along with row counters and stitch markers. Cable needles come in various shapes and sizes. The shape and size you choose to use in your knitting is mostly about personal preference, as they all perform the same function. Personally, I know that I prefer wooden cable needles because they are less likely to slide out of my projects.

Besides the yarn that a traditional Aran sweater is made from, the part that makes it an authentic Aran and not another intricately knit sweater is in the meaning of the stitches and the stitches themselves. The names of the traditional stitches write their own poem: blackberry, diamond, honeycomb, Irish moss, ladder of life, basket weave, tree of life, zigzag, trinity, and cable. Patterns known as the ladder of life and trinity have obvious religious links. Others talk more to life's experiences, e.g., zigzag relates to the trials and tribulations of married life, while the tree of life tells of hope.

Each stitch pattern represents or symbolizes an aspect of Irish life and livelihood. Families would hand down their patterning through generations so that they became identifiable by clan. In fact, there is an official register of historic patterns.

Part of the appeal and popularity of Aran knitting comes from the array of myths propagated by Heinz Edgar Kiewe. He developed meanings for the different stitches that were accepted part of the sweaters' lore. Before then, the knitting patterns that were developed in ancient times had each stitch pattern associated usually with a Christian meaning, and each family on the Aran Island had its own clan Aran.

Heinz believed that if a fisherman drowned and was found, maybe weeks later, his body could be identified by the hand knitted sweater or socks.

It is a fact that each family devised their own patterns with their own stitches and arrangements of the stitches.

However, actual historical documentation, are at odds with this mythology. Whatever you believe about the origin of the Aran Island stitches and their meaning, it has undeniably been a source of inspiration for people around the world. The Aran sweater and its unique patterns represents a history of folklore, legends, and heroes.