Knitting Machines: a brief discussion. RKG November 2024
By Sharah Blankenship

Knitting machines have assisted the knitting cottage industry since the late 16th century when the first knitting machine was invented to make silk stockings. They had a resurgence in popularity with homemakers in the 1940's through the 1960's and are trending on social media again now.

Knitting machines come in a variety of shapes, styles, quality, and purpose. Sometimes people think knitting machines are "cheating", but I say that the learning curve is steep, and it's a totally different way of working - not cheating!

Styles:
Flat-bed knitting machines:
These machines vary in size and design, but are often a bit longer than an average wingspan, and designed to sit on a table. I showed my Brother Knitting Machine, and Ingrid showed her Bond Incredible Knitting machine. Flatbed knitting machines are often identified by the distance between needles - a Bulky Gauge machine having 9 mm distance between needles, a Mid-Gauge 6-6.5 mm, and Standard Gauge 4.5 mm.

Those general gauge measurements give the user a range of yarn options for each size - typically Standard Gauge can knit lace weight to light worsted, but would struggle with a worsted weight. On the beds that Sharah and Ingrid brought, the machine itself is only capable of stockinette stitch, but almost any machine knit can have hand manipulation, which would allow the user to make lace, cables, ribbing, and other combinations of knit/purl. Other more complex machines may have "ribber beds" which sit at a 90 degree angle to the flat bed, and can be used to produce projects "in the round" or ribbing. Some machines have punch cards like old-style computers for lace or colorwork, while others have computers inside or can be hacked to be computer assisted. Joan Fernbach shared a number of machine knit sweaters that she had made on her bulky flatbed and ribber and a standard flatbed and ribber.

While some flat bed machines are still available new, previously owned are generally available through resale marketplaces, or purchased from individuals. I bought a flat-bed bulky machine for $11 dollars from a thrift store once, but has seen prices as high as several thousand. If you are looking for a flat-bed knitting machine, recommendations are to do a lot of research. Read Facebook Machine knitting group posts, look for discussions on Reddit and Ravelry about knitting machines and watch youtube videos. And don't discount our local Crafty-thrift shops. I've seen knitting machines at both Sew Green and Crafting for Good - it's probably worth asking about them if you are interested.

For a fun look at some knitting machine capabilities, Sharah recommends the youtube channel "Engineering Knits", although there are many many video resources available. Machineknitting.com is an excellent resource for identifying machines and types of machines, and her free newsletter includes a tip of the week if you are a machine knitter.

Circular Sock Knitting Machines (CSMs):
Circular sock machines were produced in the late 1900's and turn of the century. Some machines came with a "make socks per our guidelines and your machine will pay you back" offer. I get the impression that often that deal was iffy, and truly used as a marketing ploy, but often didn't pan out. Hopefully those sock knitters got enough use out of the machine to make up for the cost!
During WW1 and 2, some sock machines were put to use to provide soldiers with socks to help prevent trench-foot; and the Home-Profit machines were produced here in Rochester, NY!
Currently, metal CSMs are produced by several companies:
Chambord, Erlbacher Gearhart Knitting Machine Company, New Zealand Auto Knitter (NZAK), and Lamb Knitting Machine Corporation.
Several 3D printed machines are also for sale - Dean and Bean Sock Machine as well as Bear Valley Fibers, and various Etsy sellers. Brian, my hubby, is also working on a design for a 3D printed machine - if it works, we'll definitely share with the Guild!

Antique CSMs are also available - Sharah's was purchased from a local man, named Fred Hauck who had been an engineer at Kodak, and discovered non-functional antique machines and loved to restore them to life. I've heard stories of antique machines sold for a song that could be restored, but lately, the prices on the antiques have soared, rivaling the new machines. For more information about these machines, i recommend csmlove.com, angoravalleyfibers.com, and cskms.org

Plastic Circular Knitting machines:

These knitting machines have been around for a long time - I don't know when the first ones were produced, but I have seen versions from the 70s labeled "Mattel Barbie Knitter" but recall hearing about ones produced in the 50s. The most expensive version is probably the Addi, yes, from the company that makes Addi - turbo knitting needles. Several versions have been produced from various toy companies, Prym, Singer, and many many Chinese knock-offs. These machines usually come in 20-22 "needle" or "pegs", 40, or 46-48 sizes. Opinions are widely varied on the ease of use, the yarn to use, and the capabilities. Sharah purchased her first Addi to make hats for charity, but was disappointed to find that most of the 46-peg hats were too small for her husband and father's heads.

Addi 46 usually costs around $200, although prices soared in the pandemic. The Addi 22 is often $100. Several Chinese knock-offs of that styling often referred to as "Sentro" are under $80. If you are looking for one of these machines on Amazon read the reviews, and check out reviews on Youtube. With some careful review-reading, you may be able to discern the quality of machine - just filter out the people who say, "I bought this because it was supposed to be easy and my kid can't use it!"... they often tried to buy a toy, and not a machine. Lots and lots of information can be found on Youtube about these machines, and Peggylee Naas highly recommends the channel Koala Knits and Knacks on Youtube for high-quality and fun tutorials.

I-cord makers:
These nifty plastic tools can be used for i-cord making, and are produced by many companies. Prices may vary, but I've heard excellent things about the Tulip variety. I've also used the Embellish-knit (purple) and brought my own Prym (blue and white) version to the Guild meeting. Addi even makes one of these, called the "Egg", and last time I read the reviews, they were not great! I'd love to get a hold of one and see how it worked.
I've even had Brian print an i-cord maker from the 3D print-files available on the internet. It was a clever idea, but needed a lot of love, and I never got it to work.

For my sister's wedding, my mom wanted to knit a blanket with gaelic designs in my sister and her fiance's favorite colors. It was a big task, and mom figured out a great way to make sure that she was able to produce the final piece, she used the i-cord maker to create the gaelic knots and sewed them to the hand knit squares. It turned out beautiful, and my sister adores it.

And of course, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the i-cord tool by HeartForge Solutions. This is just the HeartForge Solutions take on a design that was viral on the internet - but it's the simplest of machines - 3 latch hooks inside a handle. Brian demonstrated it during the meeting, but if you look up i-cord tool, or i-cord maker on youtube, you'll see lots of ideas about how to use them, what to do with them, and even directions to DIY them out of polymer clay! My favorite use thus far is the i cord-bind-off!