

HAND IN HAND

Di Gilpin is bridging the gap between craft and couture

The green rolling countryside of Fife in Scotland is not a place where one would expect to find the great and the good of the fashion world. But top designers are beating a path to the tiny village of Largoward, a few miles from St Andrews, thanks to the success of hand-knit designer Di Gilpin. In the last three years, representatives from Ralph Lauren, Nike, Paul Hardy and Topshop Unique have made the journey to Di's Knitting Bothy, which adjoins her home.

Gilpin, who has been designing and making hand-knit garments for 30 years, is fast establishing a niche working in collaboration with major labels to bring hand-knit to the catwalk. Her company, Di Gilpin Ltd, not only designs knitwear for clients all over the world, but also, thanks to its growing team of 90 knitters across Scotland, offers the possibility of manufacture to couture standards.

"It's becoming a real design house," Di says. "We are building up the tools and experience to create runway pieces and do the production for them afterwards. The fashion industry is becoming conscious of the possibilities of hand-knit. It's also waking up to the notion that you can go into production here and do it very successfully."

Earlier this year Di's visited New York to give two lectures to Ralph Lauren design teams on gansey-style knitting and the provenance of Scottish traditions. "We have an open dialogue with them about how important it is to have these things made in Scotland because of the knowledge and provenance," Di says. "We are thrilled that Ralph Lauren may be looking to come back to Scotland for production, they are such a wonderful brand."

Another recent visitor to the Knitting Bothy was the designer Graeme Black, whose CV is a roll-call of fashion greats: John Galliano, Giorgio Armani, Salvatore Ferragamo. Now creative director with growing Chinese cashmere company Erdos 1436, he asked Di to collaborate with him to create 15 special pieces of hand-knit to begin and end his collection of machine-knit cashmere at Edinburgh International Fashion Festival in July.

"They are incredible pieces," Di says. "There is a pure white full-length cashmere trenchcoat with overlaid cabling, a red lace ballgown which took three of us two months to make, a full-length intarsia skirt with a Scottish garden knitted into it in the style of Arts & Crafts architect Robert Lorimer. I used every stitch in the book to create this collection."

Di uses the knitting skills and traditions of Scotland, drawing inspiration from local landscapes and stories, but creates contemporary garments which meet the demands of today's fashion industry. In the ballgown for the Erdos 1436 collection, she used a pattern from the Shetland Island of Unst, which is famed for its lace-knitting, but developed it to create a stunning three-dimensional effect.

"I think it's my duty to make hand-knitting that can't be replicated by machine," she says. "That's where it becomes innovative, when you're creating things such as three-dimensional textiles. Shows like this one are really good for hand-knit because they showcase so many Scottish techniques and stitches, but in this new way. And it pushes me more and more to be inventive and original in the way I work."

Di started her hand-knit business on the Isle of Skye in 1983 and later moved into developing





patterns and yarns for knitting companies such as Rowan and Vogue Knitting. Three years ago, she made a decision to change direction and founded Di Gilpin Ltd, shifting the focus towards creating her own high-end collection and collaborating with top designers. She hasn't looked back since.

Her first catwalk commission was for London-based maverick designers Meadham Kirchhoff in 2011: multiple pairs of hand-knitted tights and stockings and a full-length lace evening gown. Two days before the show, Gilpin and two of her knitters took the train to London, knitting all the way to get the order finished. The response to the show was excellent and since then she has worked with other designers including Mark Fast, Sophia Kokosalaki and Cabbages & Roses.

Meanwhile, her own eponymous collection goes from strength to strength, retailing in London, Europe and Japan. Created in Scottish cashmere and lambswool, it takes its inspiration from the Scottish landscape, including hand-twisted yarns in colours inspired by Scottish gemstones. This autumn also sees the launch of the studio's first machine-knit collection, Largo, created under Di's direction by young designer, Stephanie Laird.

Di sees herself as an ambassador for hand-knit in the world of fashion, whether that's explaining the history of the techniques or reassuring couture companies that their standards of fit and finish will be met. "It's creating a fabric which has the form integrated into it. It's got that wonderful essence which you recognise on the runway, the way the stitches react and move with the body. Hand-knit is a different way of thinking." ●●● Susan Mansfield

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