

# A stitch in time saves stress down the line: needlecraft is new cool way to unwind

A renaissance in knitting and embroidery – fuelled by huge social media interest – has seen young people turn creative to take a break from tech. [Karen Kay](#) reports

With his bald head and tattooed triceps, Jamie Chalmers is an unlikely advocate for the delicate art of cross-stitch, but the 42-year-old is a self-styled kingpin of contemporary embroidery.

Mr X Stitch – as he is known to his many social media followers and those who attend his workshops in London's East End – is leading a march of young, hip men and women embracing textile crafts. Across Britain, an army of needle-wielding folk are joining sewing and knitting groups, signing up to classes and enjoying the rewards of stitching, knitting and crochet in a renaissance of traditional needle skills.

Market research firm Mintel reports a 12% rise in women doing some sort of needlecraft as a hobby in the last two years. A fifth of women under 45 are interested in taking up knitting and sewing, while 17% of men aged 16 to 24 are

keen to try one of these pastimes. Julie Hassan, senior buyer at London store Liberty, says there has been double-digit growth in the fabric and haberdashery departments this season and the store is increasing its range by 25%. “To inspire shoppers, we’ll be showcasing the work of renowned crafters and textile artists alongside materials to make things with themselves,” she says.

Blue Gem, the private equity firm

**‘The therapeutic rhythm of knitting, sewing or crocheting is proven to improve emotional wellbeing’**

Polly Leonard, enthusiast

that owns Liberty, has sewn up a £68m investment in a trio of businesses, and is looking for new acquisitions in the sector, having seen a burgeoning appetite for needlecrafts among the younger generation of design-conscious consumers.

In August, it acquired Wool & The Gang, the London-based purveyor of trend-led patterns, yarns and kits created in collaboration with catwalk designers including Giles Deacon and Vivienne Westwood. Sirdar, the hand-knitting yarn business that has been spinning wool in Yorkshire since the late 19th century, has now been added to the portfolio alongside DMC, which has produced premium embroidery threads in France since 1746.

Mr X Stitch, who has a new book coming out, *The Mr X Stitch Guide to Cross Stitch*, recently designed a collection of



kits for DMC using glow-in-the-dark thread to create his “Dark-itecture” collection of urban skylines that change appearance in different lights.

“The growing trend of craft DIY to monogram and customise clothing

and accessories has led to a resurgence of embroidery and needlework,” says Massimo Saracchi, executive chairman of the new DMC Group. “These are global trends happening right across the world: it is a huge and growing



market. People are intoxicated by their phones and computers these days and want to take a break and do something with their hands. These are activities which tap seamlessly into the normalised behaviour for people to share their

creations on social media.”

According to Google Trends, searches for knitting have increased in the UK by 53% over the past year, while the emergence of platforms such as Pinterest, Instagram and YouTube has created vast

virtual communities of crafters sharing tutorials, ideas and inspiration.

A decade ago the demise of craft skills was widely predicted, but now there has been an explosion of boutique fabric and haberdashery retailers on the high street and online to cater for this new generation of stylish, contemporary makers. Names such as Merchant & Mills, Purl Soho and Loop are hallowed by modern stitchers, while “swear cross-stitch”, “feminist embroidery” and “subversive stitching” are all popular search terms online for those who want more than traditional designs.

Rachel Hart founded the Ray Stitch webshop in 2009 and opened a small

**Cross-stitcher Jamie Chalmers, centre, is among those behind the needlecraft revival. Above: Rachel Hart of Ray Stitch and, left, a quilting class at her boutique haberdashery.** Photographs by Dan Korkelia and Cat Lane

shop in Islington, north London, two years later.

“We are definitely reaching a younger, more design-conscious customer, and a generation of teens through to thirtysomethings who were never really taught to sew,” she says.

Hart expanded into larger premises earlier this month, where she hosts

sellout classes in the modern basement studio. “We run three or four beginners classes a week and they are always full. We get lots of high-powered people with stressful jobs in the City, who want to do something to release the professional pressure with something calm and creative.”

In a bid to move away from corporate life and regain her own work-life balance, Sonia Bownes launched the London Craft Club three years ago and runs a series of classes around London and the south-east, teaching patchwork, arm knitting (using your arms instead of needles to create giant stitches), beginners sewing, quilting and more. “Craft has really taken off in a big way,” says Bownes, whose roster of workshops is growing exponentially and will see a corporate arm added this year to host wellbeing craft classes in the workplace.

While our grandmothers may have sewn out of necessity, and had skills passed down through the generations, the industrial revolution of the 20th century has meant making is no longer the life skill it once was. The new wave of stitchers are benefiting from a form of crafty mindfulness in an increasingly pressurised, yet passive world, where, according to media regulator Ofcom, British adults spend an average of nine hours a day online.

“At times of economic stress and social upheaval, we often turn to craft, as creating something with our hands makes us feel good,” says Polly Leonard, founder of *Selvedge* magazine, which is hosting the Selvedge Wellbeing Spa next week as part of London craft week.

“Making is part of being human, yet as a society we are suffering from the effect of increased screen time and the lack of real fulfilment that often accompanies that. Most needlecrafts are fairly accessible and require only basic skills and minimal outlay to achieve very rewarding results.

“The rhythmic, repetitive moments necessary to knit, sew or crochet are proven to have therapeutic benefits and improve mental health and emotional wellbeing, increasing serotonin production and inducing a natural state of mindfulness.”