

Purls, Passion and Purpose

SHIRLEY PADEN shares her mission to nourish the next generation of knitwear designers. BY RUTH TERRY

Designer and Author Shirley Paden is internationally renowned for her handknit couture garments and elegant patterns inspired by 18th-century textiles and a unique four-step design process. But her most significant contribution to the crafting world is undoubtedly her purposeful investment of time, talent and treasure to cultivate a rising generation of knitwear designers. “I want to keep the cloth making art alive. I want to pass it on,” says Paden. “How do we preserve it and not let it die at a time when everything’s automated? How do we get people to be interested in continuing this?”

Paden’s grandmother taught her to knit at age 8. Later, a friend’s mother introduced her to sewing, sparking a lifelong interest in constructing and fitting garments. Though she enjoyed the craft, Paden didn’t pursue knitting as a career until 1989, when she traded her corporate career for a life of “lace, cables and collars,” she says. “I have never looked back.”

In 1992, Paden founded Shirley Paden Custom Knits and produced her first collection of couture handknits, working closely with clients to transform their initial concept sketches into meticulously crafted, precision-fit garments. “As knitters, we make the fabric, shape and size the garment — all at the same time with these two sticks and some string,” says Paden, who still sees the magic in this making. “It is just remarkable.”

While many women of color have experienced marginalization within the knitting industry, Paden’s early career mentors came from an array of cultural backgrounds, from African American to Taiwanese to Jewish Polish. In 2010, Paden launched Design-A-Longs (DALs), which are annual design competitions with a heavy mentorship component that attract participants from all over the world. The designers use Paden’s four-phase method — outlined in her 2010 book, *Knitwear Design Workshop: A Comprehensive Guide to Handknits* — to move from concept to finished garment in just a few months. Mentoring support is provided throughout the competition, this year, by Paden and four other coaches — all longtime Paden mentees themselves.

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Paden’s second book, *Knitwear Workshop Designs: Duets and Inspirations*, released in March 2021, is a compilation of patterns from the first five DALs that riff on classic Paden patterns to create new garments. The book is dedicated to her late husband, textile designer and philanthropist Melvin Berstein, who passed away while she was working on it. Over the course of their 35-year relationship, the couple privately supported education for a number of underprivileged students.

“We were committed to taking them through graduate school from pre-K,” says Paden, who recently finalized plans to establish the Shirley and Melvin Bernstein Scholarship Fund at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). For her, the scholarship fund represents “coming full circle,” a way of honoring and expanding on her and her husband’s earlier philanthropic efforts. Starting in the 2022–2023 school year, the fund will provide transformational merit- and need-based scholarships to declared knitting majors.

Paden explored various options before settling on FIT as the place where her gift would have the most impact. “It’s like the leading design school in the country,” Paden says. “But it’s also a state school with a lot of students who need financial aid.” FIT offers handknitting and industrial knitting courses and offers a two-year associate’s degree. This allows students to take time off to gain practical industry experience before reapplying later to pursue their bachelor’s. “I like that setup,” she says. “The whole key is to get people moving into the industry in a way where people can make a living at it.” FIT also has an extensive network of celebrity alumni, including legendary designers Calvin Klein and Michael Kors, and Elle Magazine Editor and Project Runway judge Nina Garcia, who retain ties to their alma mater and “want to help,” says Paden.

Since 1992, Shirley Paden has grown her knitwear business into an interconnected portfolio of books, lectures, online classes, DALs and even a smartphone app. This diverse panoply of products share a common purpose: equipping and uplifting emerging knitters and designers. “That is what really fuels my passion,” Paden says. “This is art, and art is passion. Where there’s love, there’s passion. And that is why I do it the way I do.” ■

For more information about Shirley Paden, visit shirleypaden.com.

Winners of The Shirley Paden 2022 Design-A-Long

LACE • COLORWORK • CABLES

Lace

15 THE EMBRACE CARDIGAN

DESIGNER: Christine Jones

Christine Jones is a Ballina, Australia-based designer with a 14-pattern portfolio that reveals a keen interest in reimagining knitted lace, through techniques like dropped stitches or the bold color and lettuce edging we see in her prize-winning DAL look, the Embrace cardigan. **YARN:** Valley Yarns Superwash Sport



Winners of The
Shirley Paden 2022
Design-A-Long

16 FLORAL WAVE JACKET

DESIGNER: Inbal Gross
KAL and DAL winner, Inbal Gross is an up-and-coming indie designer from Bat Hefer, Israel. Reflecting her professional expertise in graphic design, Gross's published patterns all feature saturated colors and playful, unexpected silhouettes. This emerging signature style culminates in her DAL 6 winning entry.
YARN: Brooklyn Tweed Dapple



Colorwork



Cables

17 TRELLIS CARDI

DESIGNER: Fuyumi Ambe
Tokyo knitter Fuyumi Ambe's technical mastery of cable knitting is evident in her winning DAL 6 design. Elegant and versatile, Trellis Cardi evokes a classic Chanel jacket and uses elongated, linear cabling to add texture and visual interest.
YARN: Trendsetter Yarns Merino 8

