



Bulletin

A Quarterly Newsletter by, for and about Thimble and Needlework Tool Collectors

The Fabric Knitting Sheath – Uniquely American?

by Susan Webster, Australia

In the spring 2010 TCI Bulletin (page 18), Christina Bertrand wrote about her fish-shaped, coin-silver knitting sheath and its intriguing provenance with the name and birth date of an early owner, Ann Bachman Phipps, born 1827. The sheath is 2½ inches long with engraved details and a tube soldered to the back to hold the knitting needle end. It is affixed to a heart-shaped pad by stitches through a ring at the tail and loops wound

around the top of the tube. The pad could then be stitched or pinned to clothing or an apron.

Knitting sheaths seem to be the most widely and ardently collected tools from the old-time knitter's kit. They are well-known to English-language collectors. Many sheaths, including silver and ivory, were made by commercial craftsmen (Fig. 1). The British (mainly) carved wooden sheaths, and the

Dutch created sheaths from a variety of materials but mostly wood, bone, and silver (Fig. 2, page 9). The majority of wooden knitting sheaths are folk craft items, as hand-knitting for personal and commercial purposes continued in non-metropolitan areas up to the early 1900s.

Every book on needlework tools has a photo or two of knitting sheaths. Kay Sullivan's 2004 book has wonderful information and photos about Dutch sheaths.¹ Also excellent reading about UK sheaths is Peter Brears' 1982 article, which has extensive topographical research.² But, most other books do not have much historical information or many useful dating tips.

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Figure 1. European silver sheaths. (From left to right): a) German(?) stick sheath, to be inserted under the waistband. b) Spanish chatelaine hook, with a vertical knitting sheath and rings to attach seven chains. c) French sheath, to be pinned to the waistband or blouse. d) Dutch sheath, also to be pinned to a waistband or blouse. From the author's collection.

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