

# Crafting Connections: Bridging Collections and Communities with Knitting

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*This paper introduces a novel collections-based outreach model for special collections, underscoring the vital role of outreach in linking unique and distinctive collections (UDCs) with existing interest groups. Drawing from a series of successful events, focused on knitting, held at the McGill University Library between 2021 and 2023, the model recommends the use of creative initiatives to engage pre-existing communities. These initiatives attracted a global audience, extending far beyond the university campus, and fostered connections between cultural heritage collections and specialized communities.*

## Introduction

Library outreach rooted in special collections can form the basis for meaningful engagement with existing interest groups. Rare, special, and archival collections are particularly fertile sources of inspiration, research, and community engagement. Increasingly, it is the unique and distinctive collections that distinguish a library. In a 2014 report for Research Libraries UK (RLUK), the authors used the term “unique and distinctive collections” (UDCs) to include not only rare, unique, or valuable items, but also to include new kinds of digital assets and other materials that may be found not only in the climate-controlled halls of special collections divisions. The RLUK report highlighted the potential for such collections to support “research, learning and public engagement.”<sup>1</sup> While rare collections are sometimes called and indeed treated like a library’s crown jewels, in truth, they belong to the community. These cultural heritage collections are preserved by the library for the community; for every book and item in the collections, there is a community that would benefit from exploring its contents. There may be an artist seeking inspiration, or a scholar looking for connections, and connecting collections with those who can use and be inspired by them is the ongoing purpose of outreach librarianship. Broader public

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1. Research Libraries UK, “Unique and Distinctive Collections: Opportunities for Research Libraries,” *RLUK UDC* (2014), <https://www.rluk.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/RLUK-UDC-Report.pdf>.

engagement with collections benefits the parent library as well, boosting visibility of library holdings, raising the profile of the collections and staff, and building new connections with community groups. There are, however, significant barriers to access that sometimes prevent the broader public from using rare and special collections. Outreach programming is therefore crucial to building bridges between the interested public, and the rich collections available to them. Creative and craft-based outreach approaches are effective in reaching both new and established communities, as shown in our efforts with knitting events, resources, and patterns in the past three years at the McGill University Library.

Planning and running collections-based outreach programming requires four essential ingredients: time, knowledge of collections, a creative intervention, and community connection. Rare, archival, and special collections contain the raw materials for endless programming. Over the past few years, we have refined a collections-based outreach model that can be reproduced with any collection, and which works well to connect collections with existing community groups. In this paper, we discuss the methods that informed this model, the reasons this model is effective exemplified by three case studies, and survey a selection of library and collections-based projects that craft connection between collections and community. In addition, we developed an online toolkit that can be used by libraries, archives, academic institutions, and museums to plan workshops and events inspired by their own collections following our model, and allowing for the crafting of connections with new communities.

## Literature Review

Public outreach has not always been considered an important part of special collections librarianship. In 2003, Daniel Traister noted the shift in practice of not only acquiring, cataloging, and preserving collections, but also promoting them.<sup>2</sup> Despite this shift towards instruction, engagement with exhibitions, and a less-than-enthusiastic nod towards “the public,” Traister opened his paper by acknowledging that “rare book, manuscripts, and special collections libraries remain both more difficult and more forbidding to use than any other parts of most libraries.”<sup>3</sup> Five years later, Meredith Torre built on that premise, noting that special collections are perceived as resources primarily relevant for researchers, rather than undergraduate students.<sup>4</sup> In her reply to Traister, she highlighted a crucial point: “A rare book, no matter how intrinsically valuable or monetarily priceless, signifies little until a human being

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2. Daniel Traister, “Public Services and Outreach in Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Libraries,” *Library Trends* 52, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 87–108.

3. Traister, 87.

4. Meredith E. Torre, “Why Should Not They Benefit from Rare Books?: Special Collections and Shaping the Learning Experience in Higher Education,” *Library Review* 57, no. 1 (2008): 36–41, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00242530810845044>.

engages with it.”<sup>5</sup> A recent retrospective on trends in library outreach in the United States from 1958–2020 provided a useful summary of the shifts in thought and language—from “cooperation” in the 1950s, through “instruction” and “orientation,” to “engagement,” “communication,” and finally “outreach.”<sup>6</sup>

Although the greater portion of literature on library outreach focuses on teaching,<sup>7</sup> special collections librarians are increasingly interested in outreach beyond students and researchers, such as through partnerships with public libraries<sup>8</sup> and civic initiatives.<sup>9</sup> As heritage collections, these rich resources belong to the public, and our institutions preserve them for use. However, no one can use materials of which they are unaware, or that they perceive as inaccessible.

In an informal survey about archives and rare collections conducted at McGill’s McLennan Library in 2019, students demonstrated a lack of knowledge of the rare book collection, and expressed generalized library anxiety about approaching the rare books room, as well as an unawareness that these items were open to university users and the public.<sup>10</sup> Even within our own building, the survey showed we needed to address perceptions of inaccessibility. Outreach and greater awareness of the collections was clearly needed, both on campus and beyond. The greater challenge was to reach out: to community members, the interested public, artists, crafters, and the generally curious. However, as noted in Alison Cullingford’s *Special Collections Handbook*, “outreach initiatives typically focus on attracting . . . communities living nearby” as compared to a farther dispersed community.<sup>11</sup> This may have changed in the wake of the pandemic, as can be seen in the growing body of scholarship discussing the structure and feasibility of virtual and hybrid library outreach.<sup>12</sup>

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5. Torre, 38.

6. Jamie White-Farnham and Carolyn Caffrey, “Examining Our Roots: The Origins and Evolution of Outreach in Academic Libraries, 1958–2020,” *Journal of Library Outreach and Engagement* 3 (September 7, 2023): 106–18, <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.jloe.v3.1105>.

7. Teresa Gray, “Special Collections in the Classroom: Embedding Special Collections in an Undergraduate History Writing Class,” *Public Services Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 139–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2020.1723461>.

8. Ruthann Mowry et al., “Practical Witchcraft: A Collaboration between a Special Collections Library and a Public Library,” *Journal of Library Outreach and Engagement* 3 (September 7, 2023): 2–9, <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.jloe.v3.1209>.

9. Valerie A. Harris and Ann C. Weller, “Use of Special Collections as an Opportunity for Outreach in the Academic Library,” *Journal of Library Administration* 52, no. 3–4 (April 1, 2012): 294–303, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2012.684508>.

10. Internal Survey Report, Rare Books & Special Collections, McGill University Library, July 2, 2019.

11. Alison Cullingford, *The Special Collections Handbook*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Facet Publishing, 2022), 250.

12. See, e.g., Sarah Rice and Jennifer Robertson, “Libraries Share Hybrid Programming Experiences,” *The Illinois Library Association Reporter* 40, no. 2 (June 2022): 14–16; and Tess Colwell and Alex O’Keefe, “Streamlining Support: Improving Outreach by Creating a Sustainable Events Framework,” *Journal of Library Outreach and Engagement* 1, no. 2 (September 13, 2021): 40–57.

An increasing number of libraries, archives, academic institutions, and museums seek to creatively connect with and instruct a public audience. In many libraries, both public and academic, programming of this type often takes place in makerspaces or comparable creative laboratories.<sup>13</sup> For museums, galleries, and special collections, which often have very different audiences and space constraints, many take a more pedagogical approach, developing events, workshops, and outreach projects to teach participants about a period or facet of history through creative expression. For example, in 2021 the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center (HBSC, Hartford, Connecticut) held a Sewing and Learning Workshop titled: “Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Politics of Pocket Purses.” Described as a “virtual sewing circle,” participants were mailed a sewing pattern and materials to create their own reticule—a pocket purse—to learn about the gender and racial history of pockets and small bags.<sup>14</sup> In 2023, Ordsall Hall, a historic house in the United Kingdom, partnered with the Wellcome Trust-funded project, *Sleeping Well in the Early Modern World*, to offer craft and recipe workshops based on early modern interpretations of sleep hygiene.<sup>15</sup> Literary scholars Marissa Nicosia and Alyssa Connell’s website, *Cooking in the Archives*, features more than one hundred modernized recipes from early modern Europe, and they have collaborated with organizations such as the Folger Shakespeare Library to bring these recipes and food history to a wider audience.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the best-known example of library and archival creative outreach is the Color Our Collections initiative, launched by the New York Academy of Medicine in 2016, that now features dozens of institutions across the world annually.<sup>17</sup> Participating institutions select items from their collections to create black-and-white coloring pages that can be downloaded for free. Few institutions, however, have developed their own craft patterns as a method to showcase their unique holdings. One notable outlier is the University of Glasgow, which appointed a “knitter-in-residence” and commissioned Scottish knitwear designers to create knitting patterns for a pattern

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13. Soo Hyeon Kim, Yong Ju Jung, and Gi Woong Choi, “A Systematic Review of Library Makerspaces Research,” *Library & Information Science Research* 44, no. 4 (October 1, 2022): 101202, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2022.101202>; Julie Carmen, “Makerspaces: Combining Information Literacy with Pattern Design for Fiber Art through Digital Images,” *Library Trends* 69, no. 3 (2021): 585–611, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2021.0005>; Erin Passehl-Stoddart et al., “History in the Making: Outreach and Collaboration between Special Collections and Makerspaces,” *Collaborative Librarianship* 10, no. 2 (September 12, 2018), <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol10/iss2/8>.

14. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, “Sewing and Learning Workshop: Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Politics of Pocket Purses,” virtual event, December 11, 2021. <https://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/programs-learning/salons-at-stowe/sewing-and-learning-workshop-harriet-beecher-stowe-and-the-politics-of-pocket-purses/>

15. For example, the “Make a Sleep Bag” events held in February 2023, <https://ordsallhall.com/event/sleep-feb23/>.

16. Marissa Nicosia and Alyssa Connell, “Cooking in the Archives,” *Cooking in the Archives*, June 27, 2023, <https://rarecooking.com/>.

17. <https://library.nyam.org/colorourcollections/>

book, *Glasgow University Knits*.<sup>18</sup> Some of the patterns were inspired by the university's architecture, and some designers conducted research in the University Archives to connect their designs with the original plans.<sup>19</sup>

Several institutions, including libraries, have developed creative outreach projects of various kinds. For example, the National Quilt Museum (Paducah, Kentucky) organizes an annual quilting contest called "New Quilts from an Old Favorite" in which quilters are challenged to "create an innovative quilt based on a specific traditional pattern" and according to a specified theme.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes creative projects are developed for a specific purpose. In 2016, the Canadian War Museum (Ottawa, Ontario) developed a knitting challenge in honor of its exhibition "World War Women," which highlighted the efforts of Canadian women in knitting items to donate to the troops during World War II. The challenge led to the donation of 1,841 handknit and crocheted hats, mittens, scarves, and socks to the Imperial Order of the Daughters of Empire.<sup>21</sup> A creative project might also shed light on an important cultural moment: librarians at the University of Alberta developed a data physicalization project titled *Stitching the Curve* in response to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. Eleven library staffers volunteered to knit the COVID-19 case data from each Canadian province and the combined territories, for one year (March 1, 2020–February 28, 2021), which were eventually sewn together to create a tapestry.<sup>22</sup>

Crafts and creative projects, such as these selected examples, can productively form the basis for instruction, public history, and outreach, especially for institutions seeking to connect with new audiences. Libraries, archives, academic institutions, and museums should pay special attention to the example of the University of Glasgow. Note that using institutional collections to develop patterns, tutorials, and workshops—ranging from knitting to cross stitch to biscuit art—will delight and inspire the public, and bring our unique materials to a much wider audience. To reframe one

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18. Lynn Abrams and Marina Moskowitz, "History, Sustainability and Communities of Practice," *The Scottish Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (August 1, 2023): 324, <https://doi.org/10.3366/shr.2023.0617>; Lynn Abrams, Christelle Le Riguer, and Marina Moskowitz, *Glasgow University Knits* (Glasgow: Glasgow University Publicity Services, 2022).

19. Fleece to Fashion, "Glasgow University Knits – Pattern Book – Fleece To Fashion," *Fleece to Fashion: Economics and Cultures of Knitting in Modern Scotland* (blog), <https://fleece-to-fashion.gla.ac.uk/glasgow-university-knits-pattern-book/>.

20. National Quilt Museum, "New Quilts from an Old Favorite," National Quilt Museum, accessed December 13, 2023, <https://quiltmuseum.org/nqof/>.

21. Canadian War Museum, "Canadian War Museum Challenge Inspires Knitters across Canada," *Media Releases - Canadian War Museum* (blog), February 9, 2016, <https://www.warmuseum.ca/media/canadian-war-museum-challenge-inspires-knitters-across-canada/>.

22. Hannah Pearce, "Stitching the Curve: The Final Chapter," *Library News* (blog), August 16, 2022, <https://news.library.ualberta.ca/blog/2022/08/16/stitching-the-curve-the-final-chapter/>.

of S.R. Ranganathan's five "laws" of library science:<sup>23</sup> for every unique and distinctive item in our collections, there is a curious reader, crafter, or community member waiting to be connected with it for inspiration.

## **Collections-Based Outreach Model**

### ***1. Collections***

Collections-based outreach begins and ends with the collections. This is not as simple a statement as it appears. Items in the collections inspire ideas, which prompt creative interventions, which fuel community interaction through events and exhibitions, which, in turn, allow new audiences to engage with the collections.

The first task for any collections-based project, whether an individual creative project or an outreach-focused event, is to identify and find keystone items in your collection. The first step in this model is, therefore, getting to know not only your collections, but also the experts in your library. For catalogued library collections, become familiar with your discovery tool; for archival collections, consult finding aids and online collections platforms. The knowledge of the expert—a curator, subject-area or liaison librarian—cannot be overstated, especially for uncatalogued materials. Therefore, identifying items of interest often requires talking with the curator, or with researchers who are working in the field. This groundwork is invaluable later as ideas develop from this early inspiration. For example, the Outreach Librarian at McGill University, who worked with the rare collections for a number of years, was able to find useful items in the collections to animate a series of successful events focused on knitting held between 2021 and 2023; details of those projects are discussed in the case studies section below.

### ***2. Creative Intervention***

Having identified items of interest, the next step is a creative intervention. The type of the intervention will depend on what craft or activity will form the basis of the programming. We experimented with knitting, a craft we both enjoy. However, creative interventions do not necessarily depend on the crafting knowledge or abilities of specific librarians; this can present an opportunity to collaborate with the very community you are targeting.

In our case, we created knitting patterns by first using the online knitting, cross-stitch, and crochet pattern design tool Stitch Fiddle.<sup>24</sup> This tool allows for the creation of knitting charts from scratch, but also for the importation of images that the program can then use to autogenerate a multicolored chart—although in practice we found

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23. S.R. Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science* (Madras, India: Madras Library Association, 1931).

24. <https://www.stitchfiddle.com/en>

drafting charts ourselves to be more useful. From charts, we then developed full knitting patterns and created sample projects, allowing for images of a finished project to accompany the pattern and be used in promotion. In addition to knitting instructions, the patterns included a one-page description of the inspiration behind the pattern, providing historical and bibliographical context, as well as direct links to the collections that inspired them.

### 3. Community Engagement

Developing a creative intervention is a fun and fulfilling task, but it does little good if the program is not promoted, or connected with an interested community of practice. In our experience, identifying an online community with a related interest creates a ready-made public audience outside of the university. We benefitted heavily from promoting the event on Ravelry, a social network and online marketplace dedicated to the fiber arts, and, in particular, knitting and crochet. With over nine million registered users, and over three million of those users active in 2023,<sup>25</sup> Ravelry represented an active and eager online community where users access and purchase patterns and engage with other crafters near and far. Users also regularly use Ravelry in search of inspiration for their crafting, such as by browsing the “Hot Right Now” patterns; patterns with the most visits in the last twenty-four hours; and “Debut Patterns,” where the first pattern added to Ravelry by a designer is spotlighted.<sup>26</sup> Some crafters consider browsing Ravelry even more inspiring than visiting a yarn or craft store, as the virtual space features no physical limitations and caters primarily to independent designers.<sup>27</sup>

Scholars have already investigated how Ravelry’s online platform enhances or even replaces in-person gatherings for a devoted community.<sup>28</sup> Similar pre-existing online communities with devoted followers and contributors provide an excellent starting point for outreach. Such communities are already delocalized and used to interacting virtually over their shared passion, and can generate grassroots discussion of an outreach project. According to Kate Orton-Johnson, web technologies and online

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25. User Statistics, Ravelry, <https://www.ravelry.com/statistics/users>, accessed December 14, 2023 (constantly updated).

26. Linda Polin, Sheila Pisa, Bonnie Nardi, Sylvie Noel, and Dev Sen., “Community-Mediated Search for Information: Finding Information and Help Inside and Outside Ravelry.com” (American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April 17, 2015) 26, [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Linda-Polin-2/publication/277020943\\_Learning\\_Inside\\_and\\_Outside\\_Practice\\_Communities\\_Community---Mediated\\_Search\\_for\\_Information\\_Finding\\_Information\\_and\\_Help\\_Inside\\_and\\_Outside\\_Ravelrycom/links/555f83b908ae9963a118b372/Learning-Inside-and-Outside-Practice-Communities-Community---Mediated-Search-for-Information-Finding-Information-and-Help-Inside-and-Outside-Ravelrycom.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Linda-Polin-2/publication/277020943_Learning_Inside_and_Outside_Practice_Communities_Community---Mediated_Search_for_Information_Finding_Information_and_Help_Inside_and_Outside_Ravelrycom/links/555f83b908ae9963a118b372/Learning-Inside-and-Outside-Practice-Communities-Community---Mediated-Search-for-Information-Finding-Information-and-Help-Inside-and-Outside-Ravelrycom.pdf).

27. Polin et al., 26.

28. Kate Orton-Johnson, “Knit, Purl and Upload: New Technologies, Digital Mediations and the Experience of Leisure,” *Leisure Studies* 33, no. 3 (May 4, 2014): 305–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2012.723730>; Hannah R. Thome, “Ravelry.Com: Augmenting Fiber Craft Communities and Social Making with Web 2.0” (master’s thesis, Ohio University, 2018), 16–36, [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=ohiou1524488670252085](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ohiou1524488670252085).

communities have become an “embedded part” of the enjoyment of hobbyist communities.<sup>29</sup> As key places where communities already congregate both locally and globally, tapping into online communities is a powerful place for outreach to occur.

## Case Studies

We began experimenting with this collections-based outreach model in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of McGill University Library’s Strategic Priorities is to enhance access to, and engagement with, collections.<sup>30</sup> The conglomerate of rare and special collections at McGill University, therefore, has an established public events program running an average of twenty-five to thirty annual public events, as well as a dedicated Outreach Librarian. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, offerings moved online with an entirely virtual Fall term in September 2020. COVID-19 lockdown protocols were particularly strict in Montreal, as compared to many other major North American cities. Consequently, creative virtual outreach events and digitized resources were the only ways to allow our community to engage with our collections. Public distancing was still in effect in February 2021 when we held the first event in this model, “Rare Stitches: Knitting Inspired by Illuminated Manuscripts,” so, we initially planned it to be held over Zoom and were surprised when the number of RSVPs soared to over seven hundred. As this was well past the standard Zoom limit of three hundred attendees, we had to livestream the event on YouTube to accommodate what was, by far, the largest number of respondents to any event, either in-person or online, to that date.

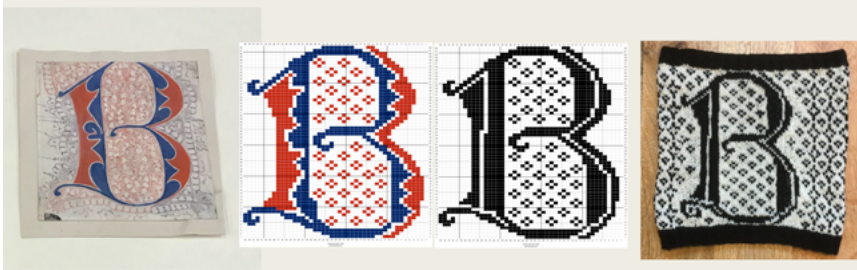
This was also the first University Library event to follow the collections-based outreach model by combining a created product—a knitting pattern—with a presentation and a conversation between librarians and knitters. Beginning in early fall 2020, we planned the creation of a knitting pattern based on library collections. Outreach Librarian Jacquelyn Sundberg’s suggestion of medieval illuminated initials or music notation proved useful, and in consultation with the Medieval Manuscript curator, they identified images from the many bound manuscripts and individual leaves, some of which were already digitized as part of the digital collection *Horae: Collection of Books of Hours*, that could be translated into a two-color colorwork knitting pattern. Final selections included a fifteenth-century Italian antiphonal (MS Medieval 073) and several excised initials (figure 1).

Kristen Howard developed colorwork charts for a knitted cowl for every letter of the Latin alphabet, and published the pattern for free on Ravelry the week before the event. The pattern, entitled *Manuscript Cowl*, also included an information page that provided a brief description of medieval manuscript culture and the Library’s me-

29. Orton-Johnson, “Knit, Purl and Upload,” 306.

30. McGill Library, “Strategic Priorities 2022-2025,” <https://www.mcgill.ca/library/about/planning>.





**Figure 1.** Pattern development for “Manuscript Cowl.” Left: Excised initial B, MS Medieval 074, McGill University Rare and Special Collections, used by permission. Center: 3-and 2-color charts developed with Stitch Fiddle. Right: Test-knit of finished pattern by Kristen Howard 2021, all used by permission.

dieval manuscript collections.<sup>31</sup> Before the event, the pattern was downloaded more than 550 times within the first twenty-four hours it was available.<sup>32</sup> Ravelry’s “Debut Patterns” feature likely led to this strong performance, as did an eye-catching featured photograph of the finished product (figure 1). The online pattern page directed interested knitters to register for the event. The hour-long event was well received, with over three hundred simultaneous viewers tuning in via the YouTube livestream<sup>33</sup> and on Zoom. Both platforms featured an active moderated live chat.

Based on feedback from the 2021 event, we planned a paired virtual workshop and event for the following year: “Knitting 101” and “Knitting in Code.” “Knitting 101” was a smaller, interactive workshop where librarians instructed attendees in basic knitting skills required for the new pattern created as part of “Knitting in Code.” Interest in the “Knitting 101” workshop also well-exceeded our planned capacity of forty people, with over two hundred RSVPs and 142 simultaneous attendees. Using breakout rooms on Zoom, we created smaller groups around three topics: basic knitting skills, pattern questions, and a showcase of selected knitting content in the Library’s rare collections.

The paired event, “Knitting in Code,” again combined history lecture and a pattern presentation. Inspired by apocryphal and historical traditions of coded and ciphered knitting, Howard gave a talk on that history, and created a pattern, Secret Message Pillow Cover, based on a WWII-era pillow cover pattern, and which sampled two

31. Kristen C. Howard, Manuscript Cowl, knitting pattern, available at <https://www.ravelry.com/patterns/library/manuscript-cowl>.

32. Kristen C. Howard, “In just over 24 hours the Manuscript Cowl has been downloaded >550 times! It’s been great to bring illuminated manuscripts & the holdings of @McGill\_ROAAR to so many knitters across the world,” X post, February 12, 2021, <https://twitter.com/krchoward/status/1360315470663016449>.

33. Event recording available at “Rare Stitches: Knitting Inspired by Illuminated Manuscripts,” video, 58:24, February 19, 2021, <https://youtu.be/DowLT0zAD48>

different coded knitting techniques.<sup>34</sup> The pattern was again made freely available on Ravelry, where it has been downloaded more than five hundred times.<sup>35</sup> Like the Manuscript Cowl pattern, the Secret Message Pillow Cover pattern includes information on knitting espionage, as well as items in the Library's rare collections. Interest in "Knitting in Code" exceeded that of all other events: the event received 1,115 RSVPs from around the globe, and 602 attendees to the YouTube livestream, where a lively chat topped 550 total messages.<sup>36</sup> The recorded livestream has now been viewed 4,427 times (as of January 30, 2024) and earned 167 likes.<sup>37</sup>

In 2023, we planned two paired events to provide contrasting approaches to the same material. We first hosted scholar Dr. Tina Gianquitto for a hybrid talk on nineteenth-century women plant collectors, accompanied by an exhibition of nineteenth-century specimen books created and illustrated by women. The exhibition bridged the event with "Knitting Natural HerStory" the following month, where we presented a new knitting pattern, Halidrys Cowl, inspired by the plants, colors, and creators of those same specimen books.<sup>38</sup> In this case, the pattern creation process was comparable to that of the Manuscript Cowl, with Sundberg conducting initial research assisted by the collection curator. After identifying books of interest, and creating initial sketches and digital samples, Howard then created the knitting pattern for an infinity cowl with an all-over two-color pattern based on a preserved sample of *Halidrys siliquosa* (Sea Oak) from botanist Mary M. Howard's marine herbarium *Ocean Flowers and Their Teachings*.<sup>39</sup> The knitting-inspired event was once again well-attended with 192 online attendees and forty in-person. Attendees travelled from as far as Ottawa, a two-hour drive, to be able to attend in person, share their projects, and interact with the books and samples in real life. Even though events continue to be offered in a hybrid format, in-person attendance has slowly resumed since post-pandemic reopening in fall 2022.

### Promotion, Event Follow-up, and Impact

As Outreach Librarian, Sundberg created a robust promotion plan to publicize the events to reach a wider community. We publicized all events one month in advance via internal campus channels, an external email distribution list, and the library's social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), including paid advertise-

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34. Kristen C. Howard, Secret Message Pillow Cover, knitting pattern, available at <https://www.ravelry.com/patterns/library/secret-message-pillow-cover>.

35. As of December 15, 2023. Download numbers available to pattern author (Kristen Howard) on Ravelry through features available to Ravelry Designers.

36. "Knitting in Code with Kristen Howard," LiveStream recording, 1:01:44, March 9, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/live/ubo-MnEH0LA?si=HtOef9FUtfvLlneF>

37. "Knitting in Code with Kristen Howard."

38. Kristen C. Howard, Halidrys Cowl, knitting pattern, available at <https://www.ravelry.com/patterns/library/halidrys-cowl>.

39. Mary M. Howard, *Ocean Flowers and Their Teachings* (Bath, England: Binns & Goodwin, 1846).

ments on Facebook.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the knitting patterns were posted on Ravelry,<sup>41</sup> where we also created event postings to reach the forums and knitting groups who find connections on that platform.

We also reached out to knitting groups to promote the event, as well as to prominent knitting YouTuber Roxanne Richardson, who mentioned some of the events on her channel. Knitters created their own conversations about the knitting events, helping us to reach far beyond our own community members. For example, on Ravelry, a knitter shared the event in a forum that garnered forty-eight posts from twenty-six individuals and reached a total of 1,840 readers.<sup>42</sup> This demonstrates the power of reaching into an already existing online community.

“Knitting in Code” was organized in conjunction with University Advancement’s twenty-four-hour fundraising day, McGill24. Advancement therefore assisted with publicity, sending out the event as part of their promotion to a wide distribution list of alumni worldwide. However, the event was exceptional for bringing in a community of viewers that had no prior association with the University: 70% were not alumni, students, staff, or faculty. Attendees hailed from Canada, the United States, Brazil, Australia, Sweden, France, Ireland, Germany, Brussels, Austria, and New Zealand. This event gave our collections truly unprecedented worldwide exposure well beyond the rare books and library community in Montreal. Although friend-raising, not fund-raising, was the principal goal, the event did boost fundraising efforts: the Library received 178% more donors during McGill24 than the previous year, which University Advancement attributed to the success of the event.

A few days after each event, we sent follow-up messages with knitting resources, pattern links and direct-download PDFs, and the event recording. The recordings links were also substituted in the knitting patterns on Ravelry where the original RSVP links had been, driving interested individuals to continue to engage with the online content.<sup>43</sup> Links to further information were also provided when useful; for example, a link to an earlier University Library event of a choral performance of the manuscript’s

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40. McGill Library, “Virtual Event, Rare Stitches: Knitting Inspired by Illuminated Manuscripts,” Facebook event advertisement, in advance of February 21, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/events/228106905584989/>; McGill Library, “Knitting 101 with ROAAr,” Facebook event advertisement, in advance of February 14, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/events/4836706459780866/>; McGill Library, “Virtual Event, Knitting in Code,” Facebook event advertisement, in advance of March 9, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/events/534647334433464/>; McGill Library, “Hybrid Event: Knitting Natural History,” Facebook event advertisement, in advance of May 30, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/events/110529418696018/>.

41. Howard, Manuscript Cowl; Howard, Secret Message Pillow Cover; and Howard, Halidrys Cowl.

42. LuckyPartridge, “Knitting in Code,” *Needlework News & Events* (group forum on Ravelry.com), statistics as of December 14, 2023, <https://www.ravelry.com/discuss/needlework-on-the-net/4185366/1-25>.

43. For example, Howard, Manuscript Cowl.

music is available on the pattern page for the Manuscript Cowl.<sup>44</sup> All pattern pages also include a link to make a financial gift to McGill’s Rare Books and Special Collections.

Many attendees opted to receive the Library’s monthly Rare Books digital newsletter, creating an ever-growing distribution list, and ensuring attendees would be aware of future events and collections of interest. General interest in the events, as shown by the number of RSVPs, attendees, messages received in advance of the event, and emails received after the fact confirm that the shared interest in rare books, manuscripts, and knitting struck a chord with attendees who tuned in from around the globe (table 1).

TABLE 1							
Impact Statistics							
Year	Event	No. of RSVPs	No. of simultaneous viewers/ attendees	No. of views of recording	Knitting Pattern	No. of downloads	No. of “favorites”
2021	Rare Stitches: Knitting Inspired by Illuminated Manuscripts	741	342	1,300+	Manuscript Cowl	1,479	811
2022	Knitting 101	208	142	555			
2022	Knitting in Code	1,115	602	4,200+	Secret Message Pillow Cover	542	391
2023	Knitting Natural HerStory	455	232 (192 online and 40 in person)	1,000+	Halidrys Cowl	175	139
<i>Statistics as of December 1, 2023.</i>							

Additionally, there have been an increased number of reference questions on the subject of knitting and fiber arts in the collections the past two years. We have also had individuals visit the Rare Books reading room with crochet and embroidery projects of their own to share, and to explore the collections for their own inspiration. While not a significant number, these in-person visits are the fruit of the online initiatives started during pandemic closures. Increasing in-person attendance and occasional visits show that the goals of community-building and broader exposure of the collections are being met by continued outreach projects in this series.

44. Howard, Manuscript Cowl.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Existing communities of practice built on shared interests can foster fruitful engagement with library collections, as demonstrated by the series of knitting events discussed here. Pandemic-related closures and physical isolation proved to many that there is power in handcrafts to quiet our minds, busy our hands, and connect with others. There is likewise power in connecting with others around those shared interests, which can happen in meaningful ways via online communities of practice. Virtual platforms like Ravelry provide international reach beyond the usual special collections user base of scholars and students. Such communities have an established mode of communication, and members are used to interacting virtually over their shared passion in a delocalized way. This was useful during the pandemic, but that utility continues, as shown by the events discussed above.

These events were effective for several reasons, not least of which was the fact that they aligned not only with institutional goals of engaging broader communities with library collections, but also with the interests of an established community. We therefore had the institutional support required to plan these events, and to invest the time required to create patterns demonstrating an alternative way of accessing and engaging with library collections. We found the overlap between those who knit and those who enjoy rare books is large. We built on that audience strategically, ensuring continued success and assessing our communications methods and events format with each new iteration. Some topics, like knitting espionage, proved of greater interest than the related pattern, whereas some patterns proved much more popular than the accompanying lecture. Striking images of finished knits and stark color contrast in those knits also drove user engagement. Combining the two features of the collections-based outreach program—a creative intervention and a scholarly lecture—allowed us to reach a wider interested audience.

We hope that the success of this series of creative programs can provide an argument and foundation upon which other interested institutions can build. The model of creative, collections-based outreach that formed the backbone for these programs is useful not only with fiber crafts, but as a basis for any form of creative outreach. The potential for rich, engaging activities in all sorts of domains and topics lies waiting in the stacks of the library collections. In our experience so far, we used our domain-specific skills and focused on a shared crafting passion. This model can, however, be driven by the collections themselves as well as the skills and interests of your team. For instance, if your institution has an astronomy collection, there is potential for a creative event engaging local astronomy groups, or broader online communities of stargazers. If your collection is strong in music history, why not use this model and bring life to that collection by pairing musicians and artists with historical manuscripts? Perhaps pottery, poetry, or coloring and sketching could be the craft your team might employ.

To further support others who might be interested in a creative intervention, but benefit from a more structured starting point, we created a Creative Outreach Toolkit which is now freely available online.<sup>45</sup> This guide provides tools and resources to equip librarians to create and host their own collections-based creative projects and outreach events. It is organized into four parts, following the workflow of planning a creative project from idea through to follow-up and assessment. This guide could be used by librarians looking to use our existing patterns and webinars and host a local event using that material, or it can provide the foundation for others looking to create their own creative reinterpretation of items in their collections.

Many institutions may not have a designated outreach librarian, but rather share those responsibilities between a number of individuals. Regardless of how outreach responsibilities are divided, a common understanding of the importance of increasing accessibility and visibility of rare and special collections to broader public audiences is absolutely necessary for creative initiatives like this to succeed. Creative outreach programs can help libraries transition from gate keepers to bridge builders by crafting connections with new communities. We look forward to seeing all of the ways libraries will knit new connections between their cultural heritage collections and special interest communities.

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45. Jacquelyn Sundberg and Kristen Howard, "Creative Outreach Toolkit," December 2023, <https://libraryguides.mcgill.ca/creative-outreach-toolkit>.